



SHANGHAI
FREQUENCIES



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ISSUE EDITOR
Mikkel Bindslev

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Marko Bauer, Amy Ireland

AUTHORS & CONTRIBUTORS
Mikkel Bindslev, Anna Greenspan, Nick Land, Amy Ireland

ISSUE EDITORIAL BOARD
Marko Bauer, Andrej Škufca, Andrej Tomažin

ŠUM EDITORIAL BOARD OF THE OUTSIDE
Edmund Berger, Amy Ireland,
Reza Negarestani, Luciana Parisi, Peter Watts

ART DIRECTION AND ISSUE DESIGN
Jaka Neon

PROOFREADING
Miha Šuštar

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sumrevija@gmail.com · <http://sumrevija.si>

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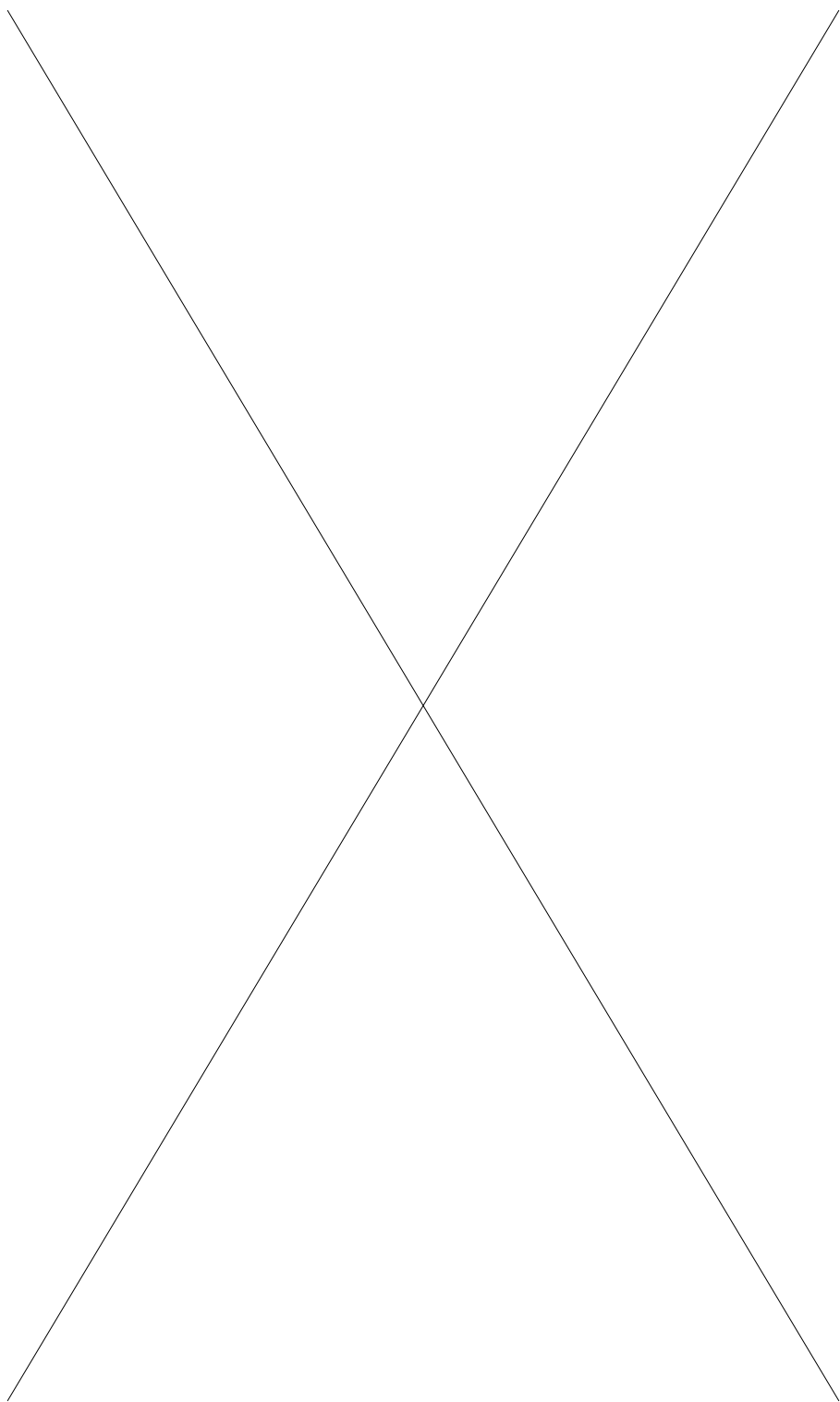
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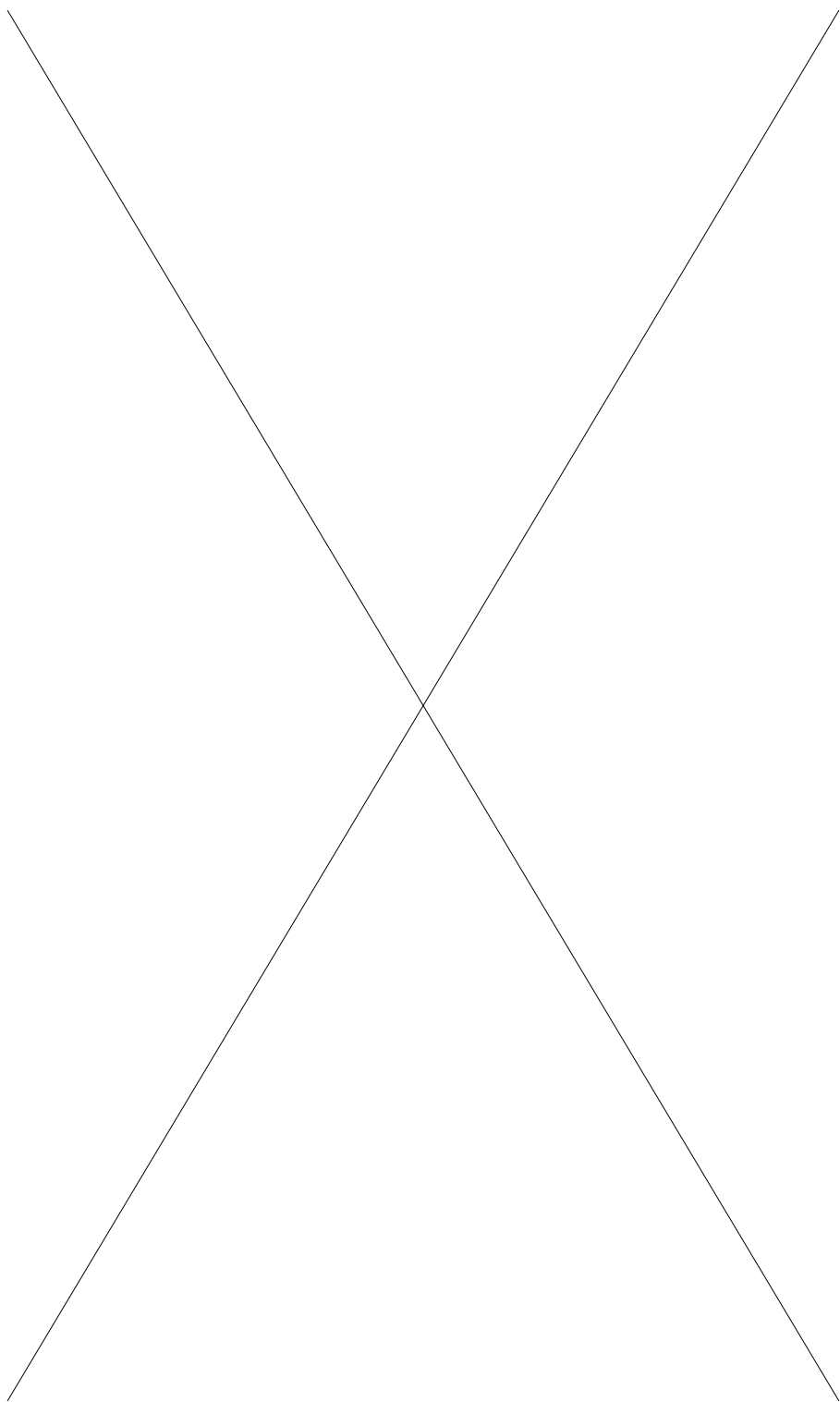
1929

Noise from the streets rose uncertainly tonight, muffled, an underwater density. Air conditioners, buses, taxicabs. Beyond that, something obscure: the nonconnotative tone that appeared to seep out of the streets themselves, that was present even when no traffic moved, the quietest sunups. It was some innate disturbance of low frequency in the grain of the physical city, a ghostly roar.

Don DeLillo



MIKKEL
BINDSLEV



We know that it is not given to us to observe our age with the eyes of an archaeologist ... There is a multitude of temporalities whose rhythm oscillates like the pendulum swing of innumerable clocks each alongside the other.

Ernst Jünger

The so-called immortal works of art just flash briefly through every present time.

Walter Benjamin

Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. Genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.

Walter Benjamin

We have reached the end of the Neolithic period. After the end of the Neolithic we have come to the era of the synthetic. No one will know what a stone is anymore, no one will know what a tree is, no one will know what a flower is, no one will know the mathematical symbol for infinity. But why should we care?

Giacinto Scelsi

A dying body doesn't think about the future.

Eugenia P. Butler

A SERIES OF BELLS

EXHIBITION HALLS

Shortly after arriving in Shanghai my attention is caught by a remark in a newspaper: 'The events in our lives are like a series of bells being struck and the vibrations spread outwards, affecting everything, our present, and our futures, of course, but our past as well. Everything is changing and vibrating.' The image still resonates a day or two later in the cool darkness of the exhibition halls of the Shanghai Museum. In a moment of dizziness, probably caused by the spotlights directed at the archaeological finds, the ancient bronze bells and vessels remind me of models of a future architecture, an architecture and future constantly ahead of us, it seems. At least it is an architecture different from and more alien than the buildings of Shanghai waiting for me in the bright sunlight outside the museum, even though the top of the museum, according to a description, is 'shaped like an ancient cooking pot'.

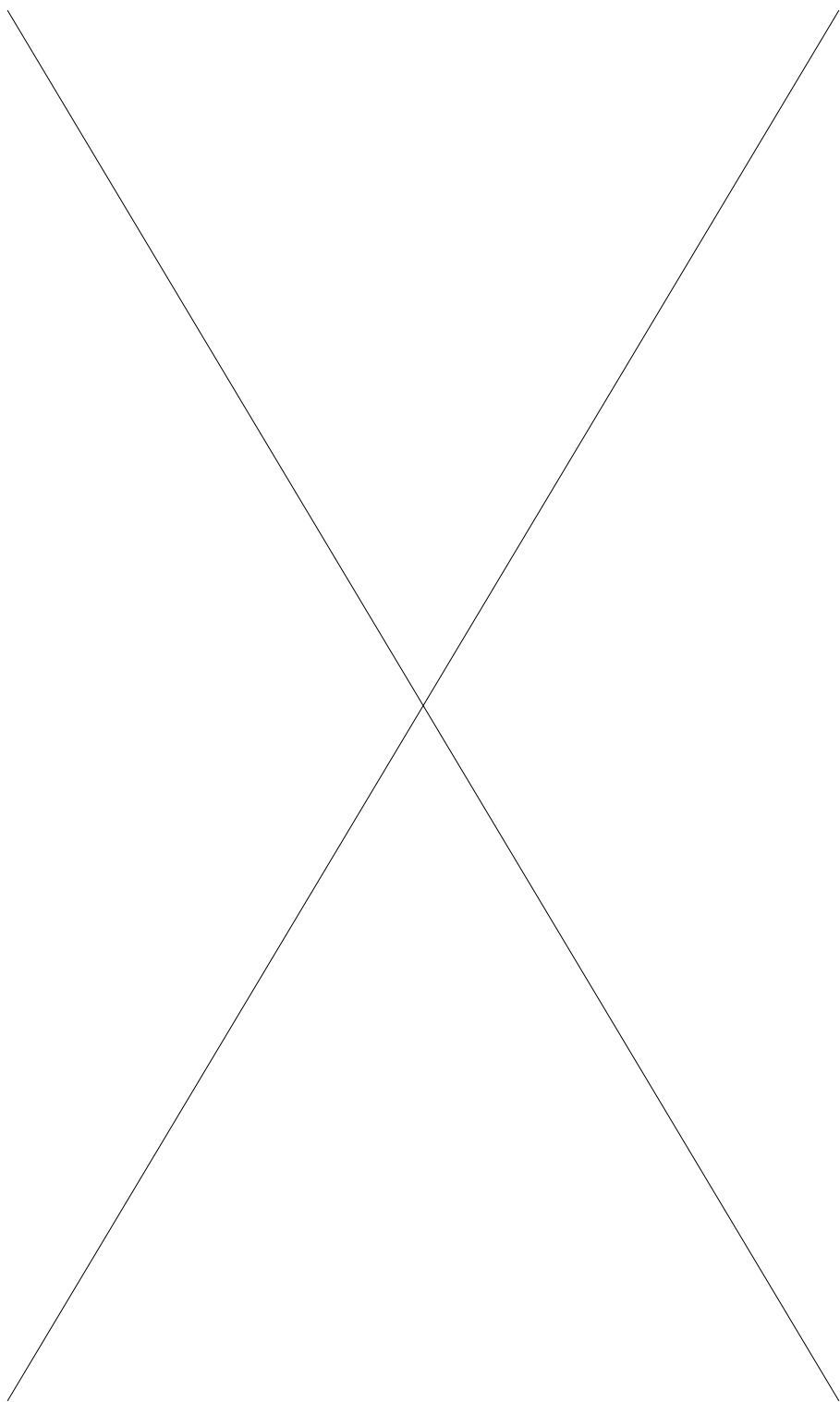
DISPLAY CASE

Stopping up, dazzled, to study the bells, their similarity to models in a miniature film set reminds me of, even feels much closer to, the original shock of being exposed to the outlandish panorama of *Blade Runner* than the sunlit Shanghai buildings. Yet my sense of disorientation is hardly an experience of the historical process brought to a standstill by a striking

and surprising constellation of different historical facts. It is not even an instant of historical recognition in which the 'then and there' is legible in the 'here and now'. In fact, it is suddenly difficult, almost impossible to understand how anyone can define the highest degree of materialism in historical analysis as an image, or a constellation forming an image, which per definition lacks all characteristics typical of matter. It is a curious materialism that seeks nothing but the transformation of matter into image, a curious analysis in which all measurable elements, such as scientific quantities, equal historical nothingness. Do cultural manifestations, such as the items in a museum, also equal nothing? Then the basis of history would be an emanation from nothing, an emanation of light from nothing.

SPOTLIGHT

The light is flickering and making me dizzy with thought. It is not just the so called immortal works of art that briefly flash through every present time, the fastest ones being the hardest to grasp; it seems to me that any cultural manifestation, whether it is in the form of art, architecture, design, music, performance or poetry, manipulates the dimension of time as well as the figural forces of the spatial dimensions and disrupts the entropy of time. A photograph, for instance, does not show, as is the common assumption, a moment frozen in time, but gives access to a moment moving at such great speed that it always keeps up with the speed of the present. In the same way, the thousands of years old bronze bells are locked in space but move in time, always ahead of us. They are the promise of a future we still do not know how to meet, and, as such, a more distant future than the future city of Shanghai under construction.



TUNING, TURNING

RESONANCE

The crowded metro train shoots through tunnels lit by screens displaying ads. In a ghostly mirror effect, the images move along in parallel with the immobile passengers. They keep at the same speed as the train. In their light it does not seem a particular farfetched idea to unlock different futures hidden in archaeological finds. Two extreme temporal models for dynamic development already invite to develop this thought into a critical approach: invasions from the future rebuilding the present in their own image, and geotrauma, the speeding up of geological processes to reveal the scream of the earth and the wound inflicted on cosmic indifference by the emergence of terrestrial life. Both ideas resonate in archaeology, though at a different scale: from the point of view of the past being investigated, archaeological excavations are invasions from the future. The excavation itself, as a form of creative destruction, can seem to be a local, earthly trauma. The only difference is that most writings on geotrauma, the most extreme example being the writings of the Ccru, portray the past with no special regard for man-made material reality, which is the traditional object of archaeological research. Furthermore, in a very literal sense, archaeological excavations are experiences of, and experiments with, stratification and destratification, two important components of the ferocious assault on the rigid traditions and traditionalists of humanistic thought from which the ideas of invasions from the future and geotrauma stem, though in philosophy stratification and destratification are mostly used in a purely abstract

sense as terms for the dynamics and standstills of thought. In archaeology stratification and destratification show the coordinated thought of earth and material culture, each trying to silence the other.

As archaeology is a discipline solely committed to the past, my own exploration is obviously going to be both an argument for a new engagement with the practice and theory of archaeology and an argument for archaeology to seek out other disciplines to widen its critical scope; at best, the process will follow two paths simultaneously: one towards an understanding of the mechanics of an inhuman thought both vulnerable to invasions and traumatic encounters and extremely alert to alien forms of intelligence, ultimately to push this thought into archaeological territory, and one towards an expanded field of archaeological thought and practice, ultimately to push it into an inhuman territory of thought.

If my pure intuition of a goal is a fertile hybridization of disciplines, methods and ideas, periods and timelines, achieved by strengthening the resonances between archaeology and a vocabulary of philosophical ideas, their intellectual history and the setting in which the concepts of geotrauma and invasive futures were developed, the first task must be to reconcile abstract thought with the concrete practice and experience of archaeology. Reviewing the role and place of the past in writings touching on geotrauma and invasions from the future in combination with an evaluation of examples of abstract thought developed from a material basis will serve as the first step. Considerations of the methodological engagement with any chosen material, in the form of the point of view adopted in order to think with, or along the lines of, a specific matter, rather than to merely think and write about it, will serve as the second step. To add to the discussion of what it means to think and write about something, the third step will represent a case against poetics. In this context, the term poetics denotes the science of bringing into being something which has no prior existence, primarily in writing. The fourth step will involve navigation, manipulation of figural forces, and fragmentation. Finally, the question of nihilism will have to be confronted, otherwise uncontested old values will create obstacles. Poetics, for instance, has a massive intellectual and cultural value because of its closeness to poetry. It leaves little room for divergence. Consequently, it is best to consider the association of poetry with poetics as a horizon to cross. All of this is circumscribed by the question of writing, not as a model, but as a tool, an instrument, a portal for the material as well as immaterial forces at work. The steps do not follow from each other in a linear fashion; rather, each step will at some point turn back towards a prior position and review and renew its path forwards from there, like the footsteps of a ballerina dance routine.

DISSONANCE

Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* has already shown how the legacy of geotrauma and invasions from the future can be used on the distant human past and be mediated through writing as a method as well as a question of inquiry. Yet, the understanding of archaeology as 'hidden writing' seems problematic. Not only is it at odds with the tendency of Ccru to probe the non-discursive spheres of digital codes and numeral logic. More alarmingly, it veers dangerously close to a curious materialism that seeks nothing but the transformation of matter into the mad game of writing. Rather than strengthening elemental aspects of a base materialism which, to me at least, is the most attractive and promising part of archaeology, *Cyclonopedia* reinforces philosophy's longstanding debasement of archaeology.

The debasement of archaeology has its roots in Freud's use of archaeology as a metaphor for intangible, hidden and repressed memories that, like earthquakes and landslides, shook the hysteric's body, and was finally consolidated when Foucault bent the term archaeology to fit his own archival research, far from the dust and bones of the past. The details are of minor importance here. The important thing is the need to push past all archaeologies of the intangible and once again soil thought with dust and bones, mud and clay. In that context the application of the concept of 'hidden writing' to archaeology is probably no more than a minor flaw or dissonance in Negarestani's work.

The minor dissonance in *Cyclonopedia* does not reduce the greater relevance of the mapping of all the ways thought is coerced by, even rooted in hidden, inhuman forces, demonic entities and sub-level intensities. No thought is ever free to use, it takes effort and compliancy of strange alliances to follow its trajectory. In archaeology, too, reasoning and development of argument are constrained, regulated, and channelled from one point in time to another by material forces and remains. Archaeologists constantly re-evaluate the alliances between geological processes and cultural dynamism.

Having noted this, the point obviously is not what psychoanalysts, historians of ideas or philosophers have written on archaeology, but to use archaeology on a psychoanalytic, historical and philosophical legacy and turn it inside out, and to use lessons from a psychoanalytic, historical and philosophical legacy on archaeology to turn archaeology inside out, so that a point can be reached where the practice of archaeological excavation and archaeological theory contest the drive towards abstraction in philosophies of destratification, or at least to a different degree revel in the sheer physicality of archaeological practice and the material basis of archaeological concepts, at the same time as the archaeological focus on man-made material reality is assaulted, ripped apart and opened towards an understanding of prehistoric societies as past intelligent machinery. The resulting wounds will affect how we

understand our own position in the modern era and the fragile outer edges of modernity, bordering on the distant past as well as the near future.

TEMPORALITY

Two particular instances of a recharged Ccru legacy, Anna Greenspan's and Nick Land's writings from China, beginning with the Urbanatomy guidebooks in the late 2000s, soon followed by the Urban Future blog writing and Greenspan's book *Shanghai Future*, already perform a strangely moderate, perhaps modulated operation on the thought of an invasive future, folding it back on itself, flattening it out on a plane reaching from the past to the present, from the present to the future, from the future to the past, and setting all in motion. The result is a new temporal model: the time spiral, innovative production combined with recollection, a 'repetition of the future through the invocation of the past'.

Shanghai Art Deco ornamentation seems to be the local, geographically and physically limited basis for the model of the time spiral. As an example of abstract thought developed from a concrete, material model set in a specific place, though seemingly not in a specific time, it is not dissimilar to Negarestani's approach to the Iranian past and the spirals whirling their way into *Cyclonopedia*. Even with its seemingly universal abstract application, the time spiral at its basis is bound to a specific location and serves to remind that it must be possible to develop other, just as abstract, theoretical models from other material examples. In discussions of the time spiral it is often mentioned how the Chinese understanding of time as descending is modelled on the water clock, though there is also the counter-notion of time as scent based on the Chinese incense clock. As such, the time spiral is a promising way to approach the past for anyone who wants to drive the base materialism of archaeology towards higher planes of philosophical and theoretical reflection and simultaneously draw the higher aspirations of free thought downwards to a new engagement with the material ground and the contingencies of earthly life.

In this context, the model of the time spiral is not unlike a tuning coil which tunes into the frequencies and wavelengths of the future, turning static noise into recognizable sounds and announcements of things to come. In addition, the model of the time spiral sums up, even temporarily fulfils, the promise of the development of alternatives to the linear temporal models of modernity, Modernity 1.0, the 20th-century Western version. The history of the 20th century has shown that Modernity 1.0 is either nothing but its own 'now, right now', a present continuously on the move, or is forever missing a 'now' to pass through to fulfil its promise of a change to come; in hindsight the advent of the modern can appear as the announcement of a turning point that is still

before us. The philosophy of invasions from the future was already a contestation of the linear temporal models of Modernity 1.0. A similar refusal appears to have motivated the Lovecraftian, inhuman demonic forces in Ccru writings on the deep past and its continued impact on the present state of the world. But with the time spiral, more details come into view, more relations between the past, present and future are drawn into consideration, and man-made material reality takes on a new importance.

PANORAMA

Back at the hotel, the curtains in my room have been drawn, closing off the panoramic view of the city from the 26th floor, as if the drama of the city is waiting for me to take my seat at the window. When the curtains are drawn apart and the window opened, everything changes: the sounds of the city come closer. The sounds accompany my reading. In the hissing noises rising from the streets, it suddenly stands out to me how frequently archaeology is mentioned to explain the model of the time spiral and, in a more general manner, how archaeology is used as a window to the past, a past more foreign than it once seemed, ‘as the present demonstrates’, and a present more foreign than it might seem, ‘as the past attests.’ In the first lines of the historical section in the *Urbanatomy* guidebook to Shanghai, archaeology is used quite conventionally to date the first settlements in the later city area, and the state sponsored writings in *Xinjian Horizons* faithfully summarize details from archaeological finds and genetic research and the revealing insights into the mixed ethnicities of ancient populations. The *Urban Future* writings also show a general, renewed emphasis on the past; while the introduction to the blog promises to ‘head straight into tomorrow’, the next post states that futurology must rely upon historical patterns and is followed by posts on the history of urbanization and civilization. Then there is the great example of the irony of Chinese archaeology: the earliest known writings in China, the famous ‘oracle bones’ [Fig. 1], tell of the future, so ‘in China, time is looped from the start’ and, one could add, cracked to its ashen core.

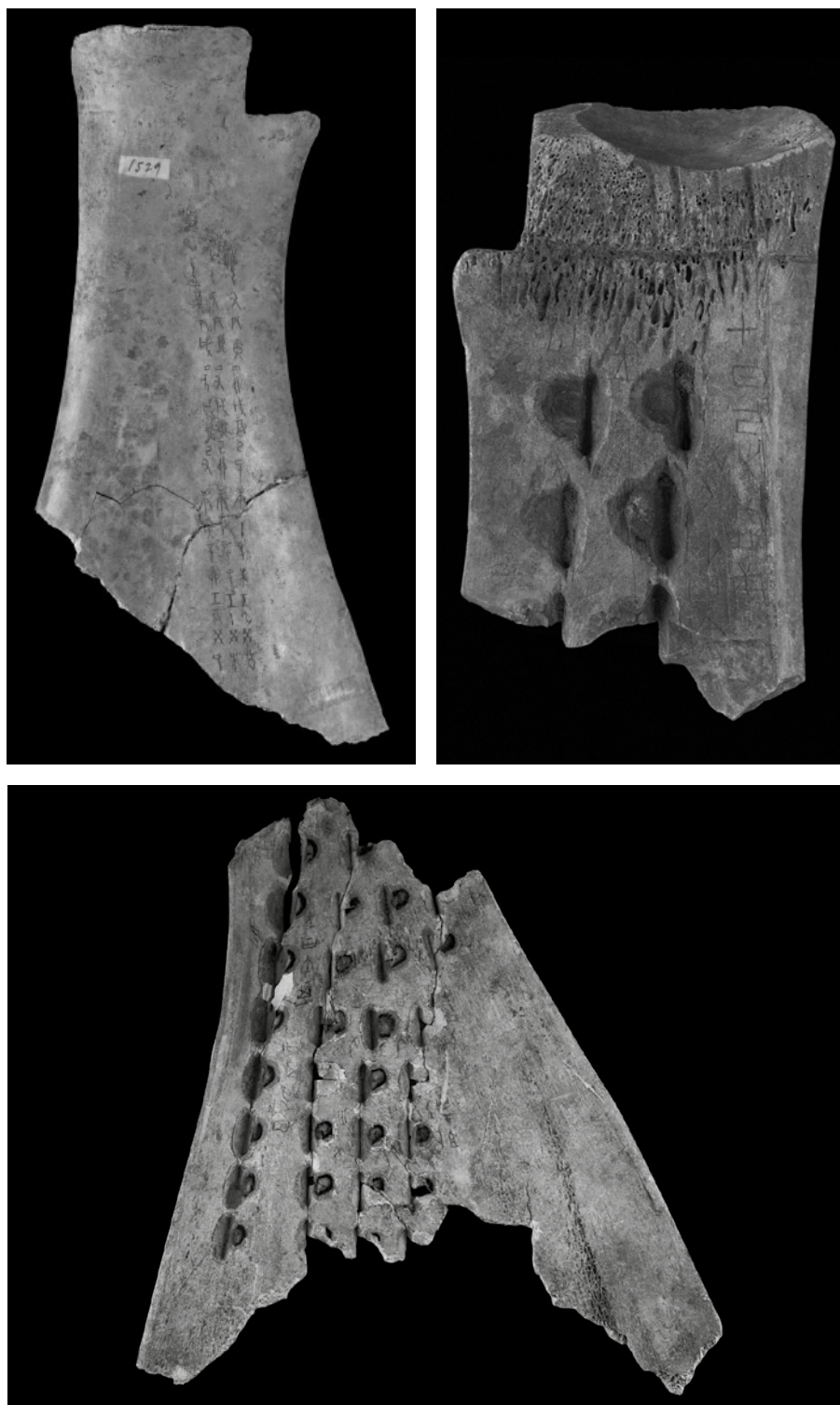


Fig. 1. Chinese Oracle Bones.

SHAKE THIS LAND

HORIZON

It is easy to get perplexed by the variation and richness in terms of style and approach to philosophical and political topics in Nick Land's writings. Lately the coldness informing his politics has caused discomfort. Personally, neither the coldness of the politics nor the analysis of the fraying edges of present-day modernity alarm me. My interest is mainly aesthetic. For me, the aesthetics of these writings, of course not understood as a science of the harmonious and beautiful, but as the relationship between experience and sensation, is the key to a work which was picked up and amplified by Ccru only to be overcharged, disintegrated, then reassembled and recharged in Shanghai.

Obviously, Land has never been particularly concerned with what appears to the senses, so the reason to think of aesthetics as the key to his work is best explained by a detour.

In a conversation, the American cartoonist Chris Ware notes how memories are always in a state of flux, shifting and sliding over the surface of recollection, until all that is left is the crumbling mortar that originally bound it together. This, he says, is the appeal of fiction writing: like music it harmonizes with the intangible process of memory, offering us melodies to sing in our mind through which we may construct the fables of our own lives, resonant with fears, desires and loves. Thus, it should be obvious that time, at least the experience of time, is not a vector. It is a shape, and it is the writer's aesthetic duty to be sensitive to that shape and sculpt it carefully.

Though Land is no less concerned with memories than with sensation, the musical influences on the writings from the 1990s to the early 2000s mark these texts as acutely aware of and sensitive to time, tempo, rhythm and the fluctuations across the surfaces of the kind of artificial intelligence that is building itself in philosophical texts during the process of writing, and also acutely aware of the point of view of writing itself. The same can be said for the Ccru writings. In this manner they introduce a problematic into philosophy that is related to the problems novelists faced 150 years ago: how to take the novel from storytelling into writing, the major distinction being that the former gives one the facts, while the latter tries to recreate the sensations and complexities of life within the fluidity of consciousness and experience. Though more inspired and formed by developments in electronic music, sci-fi narratives and movies than by the great novelistic revolution of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Ccru writings mark a comparable and just as distinct shift from the clear, systematic communication of analysis, arguments, thoughts, ideas and conclusions to a writing that dives into turbulent surfaces, fluidity and complexities of philosophy's form of artificial intelligence and its synthetic recollection of its own past life and forms.

Now, take note of Chris Ware's revelation of how time unfolds before our eyes and observe how the future's invasion of the present is already at play in vision:

I recall sitting in a science class and having a weird epiphany: namely, realizing that the time it takes for visual information to reach our brains added to the time it takes for light to travel into our eyes proved to me that we didn't live in the present; everything that we experience as happening 'now' has actually happened a split-second ago but our minds have figured out a way to reverse-engineer this sensation so we experience it as what we call 'the present'. And while we experience that, the future is already occurring.

Taken together, these observations suggest that a forceful factor in these writings is, or at least can be understood as, a blow-up of aesthetic concerns beyond the realm of the senses: aesthetics, the aesthetic dimension, is the fine line, or horizon, where what is open to perception slides into what is either too large or too small to be perceived.

This horizon is, perhaps, best termed a synthetic aesthetics, and the writings are then to be regarded a synesthetic writing in a new sense: the primary concern is not how to create something in writing, but to change the sensational, perceptual and intellectual apparatus and heighten the awareness of the artificial components of a particular philosophical outlook to the point where even the machinic components of thought react to each other. It is not a poetics, but an aesthetics, where intensity takes the role of inhuman or dehumanized sensation, and technological changes reflect a change of consciousness. Texts openly

declared to be machines for intensity rewire intelligence and connect it to questions outside the limits of the human nerve system. Poetics, in this regard, is a kind of blind alley, a detour. Despite a shared commitment to a modernist poetic project involving a rearrangement of the senses, there is no commitment to one particular practice of writing, and no sense in reading these writings as poetry. The texts do not reach out towards the domains of poetry, but to the domain of intelligence, of sentient existence, outside of poetry. The production of writings served as a pathway to this domain, but only to a certain degree.

For that purpose, the heavy reliance on intensity, the recourse to max intensity, presumably proved to be a dead end as it is merely an inhuman variation on one of the problematic aspects of utilitarianism: if what is good, either in life or thought, is the greatest possible amount of states of happiness, pleasure or, as here, intensity, the best life, the best thought, would be one simply lived as or attached to a pleasure- or intensity-producing machine. There is obviously more to life and thought. The excluded surplus, even in thought, craves for attention, the reduction of everything to a question of intensity risks getting caught in an all too human state. A dismissal of a line of thought principally focused on productions of intensity would help to explain why Ccru's implosion lead Land to a further reduction to coldness and a reliance on coldness as a guide. Still, even the anaesthetics of the turn from overheated intensity to the intensity of extreme coldness can be said to be in the domain of aesthetics, just reduced to the domain of zero heat.

PARASITISM

From an aesthetic point of view, with a minimal concern for the finer philosophical details, variations on the same motivation and method can be found in all of Land's writings, namely the absolute modern attitude from Baudelaire and Rimbaud applied to spheres and fields outside poetry: voyages into the unknown to find the new. The new always implies a changed conception of time: to be modern is to depart on voyages into 'risk that stimulates calculation, formalizes agency, and restructures time'.

Of course, these voyages can be subdivided in various ways: there is the voyage to the endpoint of nihilism where Bataille and Kant are gnashing teeth; there are the voyages in conceptual intensities in writings that function as machines for intensity; there are the voyages into non-semantic meaning and inhuman dynamics by the numeral unlocking of occult forces; there is the acceleration into an urban future shimmering on the horizon, not out of view but still out of reach; there are the voyages into inhuman territory by writing from the perspective of terminal capitalism, or 'the real subsumption of society into the risk economy, where it is difficult to identify a lacuna into which an engineered friendliness might be inserted'; there are the voyages into

political unknown regions of the ongoing fragmentation of the West; and there are the voyages into otherworldly speculation in sci-fi narratives and abstract horror.

The general method, always opened by a synesthetic horizon, seems to be to write from under the skin of another entity, whether it is someone else's thought, a silicon chip or one of the world's megacities conceived as a sentient being. Yet, as 'the subject is not the owner of its own skin', but just the intensities traversing the skin, there can be no traditional critical position of a detached, distant observation or writings from some secret place on the inside, buried deep down under the skin. These writings are from the same bodily plane as the skin, which appears to be the only position to write from.

The different skins of the chosen subject explain the differences in style. The style and the context change according to the current skin, current interests, but the same kind of statements are found consistently throughout the early writings to the latest twitter posts: capitalism as a tendency rather than a total system, the failure of traditional left-wing thought to offer substantial critique and viable alternatives on that grounds, the failure to understand that capitalism has no substantial socio-cultural consistency, etc. For the same reason, the implosion of Ccru was followed less by the developments of Kantian or Hegelian systems than by an expansion of the fields explored, the different 'skins' lived in, and by the usual solution of engaging in collective experiments of writing, for instance in the Urbanatomy guidebooks which treat the city of Shanghai as a sentient being and in an almost parasitic sense are written from the inside of the city, adapting to the perspectives of its multiple sense organs and the neural system of its diverse infrastructures.

Rather than omit the human past in general for the deep time of geology, these writings bring the question of the human past into play with the time spiral, and the time spiral induced itself by the collective experience of writing the Urbanatomy guidebooks. Despite its minor status, travel writing turns out to be an essential backdoor to a renewed approach to a multipolar world. Aesthetics is the key to the forces at play in all of Land's writings, but travel writing, not horror, not sci-fi, is the backdoor insofar as it is the contested model for any writing of *voyages* into unknown territories and also forcefully tests all attempts to move beyond the subjective.

SKIN JOB

To me, personally, all travels are travels in uncomfortable truths about myself, to the point of no longer feeling intimate with my own skin. Rather, as tonight, it feels electrically charged with the surroundings.

PASSAGES

REMINISCENCES FROM A JOURNEY TO MAFRAQ

Through the open window a subtle change in temperature and dampness is felt. A fine rain darkens the Shanghai skyline and muffles the night sounds of the city. Looking out at the misty lights, a series of questions arises: What is there to add to the legacy of geotrauma, invasions from the future and inhuman subterranean forces? In what ways can it be developed into new land which would take the past into consideration in a more direct way? If modernity should not be comprehended chronologically as a moment easily plotted in time, if modernity is the floating point of a 'now' on the cusp of erasure, with the future bleeding into the present, itself already engulfed by the past, how can any beginning of modernity be defined at all? How does a floating timeline for the onset of modernity affect, for instance, our understanding of prehistoric societies? Can the idea of floating timelines be applied to the past? Is a similar orientation towards the future found in the past, for instance in the earliest agricultural societies of the Levant and East Asia?

Did Negarestani ever write about the early agricultural societies in the Levant and how the development of writing took place in agricultural societies that had reached a certain size, a certain level of intensity, both in terms of population size and the geographical range of their trade networks? My copy of *Cyclonopedia*, heavily read during sojourns in the

black basalt desert areas of Mafraq, Jordan, got lost during my flight to Shanghai, my only resources are a few reading notes and the vague memory of an apocryphal blog post about early state management of death in Catalhöyük, the largest known Neolithic city in Anatolia. Still, as the questions of management of death and the management of other people's writings figure predominantly in *Cyclonopedia*, there is ample reason to think of the theory-fiction of Negarestani's novel as a poetics, even xenopoetics, of cultural ontology that offers a renewed touch with the distant human past through writing.

Cyclonopedia is of course a far cry from any kind of hermeneutics or linguistic turn in philosophy and cultural theory. Even language seems to be twisted by the dark terror in Negarestani's theory-fiction. In this capacity, the model of hidden writing brilliantly severs the written text's authority from authorial ownership, undoes any attempt to lock the written text and the author into a shared position and resonates widely with the noise generated by the different media platforms used to publish early versions of the writings that went into *Cyclonopedia*. Yet linking archaeology to a model of hidden writing seems insufficient to separate the thought of *Cyclonopedia* from the misunderstanding that the archaeological past is a kind of writing and therefore something to read. While the role played by hidden writing is perfectly understandable in the context of *Cyclonopedia*'s fiction and theoretical ruminations, the association of soil, earthly ground, cultural traces and the practice and processes of writing seem questionable, even when those processes counter a logic of textual stratification with a reading through holes and inconsistencies. It is ill-fitted for a base materialism with no, or only a minor, instrumental place for discursive referents at its centre, or at its lack of a centre. The more rewarding approach would be to wrest any association of writing and cultural traces from each other and direct culture back into the natural ground, without any recourse to a concept or model based on writing, textual logic or narration, and in this way enforce a move from poetics to an earthly or inhuman aesthetics. Negarestani's later concept of navigation also seems more rewarding. While hidden writing is connected to a concept of abstract space, the dimensional aspect is not clear to me. Navigation on the other hand clearly takes place in several dimensions. It implies a more plural approach to landscapes formed by cultural and natural forces.

Writing of the past, reading the past by treating it as a text, to view archaeological objects as signs that are defined by their context, and readable and decodable from it: it is hard to see that the concept of archaeology as hidden writing offers more than a variation, an adjustment, fine-tuning or minor distortion of such lines of reasoning that have already led archaeological theorists to pose archaeology as *poiesis* and archaeologists as the self-crowned poets of the Neolithic or whatever period of interest. There is more to archaeology, and also a more productive approach, than a rejuvenation of these clichés from the archaeological theory debates of the 1980s and 1990s. It is insufficient to

twist the clichés by reversing the drive towards hermeneutical explanation and focus on obscure, uncontrollable counter processes dissolving clearly defined contexts and borders, which ultimately results in hermeneutical blindness. Of course, every archaeological stratum is comparable to a page. One has to read it, either with eyes wide open or sensible fingertips, to know when to turn the page and dig further down. Still, it should be known by now that there is more one can do with strata than read them, regardless of one's intention to either enlighten, illuminate or replace a blind eye with the firm grab of hands and fingers in dirt and dust.

REDISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

In an interview, Chris Ware defines comics as separate from writing or visual art because they are simultaneously read and viewed: if the reader *views* rather than merely *reads* the pages of a comic, he is going to pay more attention. In a way, comic strips are like music notes on paper: when you read them, you hear things in your mind, visual rhythms and other sensations are vaguely called up by the drawings. Furthermore, by drawing from real life, the cartoonist will find time slows down in a peculiar manner. According to Ware, drawings, both the act of drawing and the act of studying drawings, are a way of making people stop and see things 'that we simply aren't built to do because we're language-based animals'.

This distinction between *reading* and *viewing* is illuminating, because it shows how a change of perception follows from a minor redistribution of the sensible. It is not that archaeological strata are more comparable to the pages of a comic than to writing, even though it is an inherent part of archaeological excavations to draw plans of the site. It is just that no extension or expansion of the concept of writing is needed. As Ware also states: 'The fundamental milestone in our lives is when we learn how to speak and read; that's what transforms our minds and makes us into adults. But drawing from life made me realize a completely different mental process.' No reference to writing as a model for understanding will ever be a solution. Rather, references to writing as a model point towards a problematic, a horizon to cross, with considerable effort, as is the case with everything that goes against an animalistic basis.

FROM ERASURE TO DESTRUCTION

Looking at the tradition of art and literature in the 19th and 20th centuries, it is remarkable how dismissive art and poetry can be of their own status. Yet, cultural theorists frequently promote the old-fashioned cultural status of art and poetry as the highest values to strive for, and it seems that this will to art has impregnated almost all fields of cultural theory. Archaeology is no exception. We are left with endless variations on philosophy's attempt to resolve the ancient conflict between philosophers and poets. Yet declaring philosophy a genre of literature never solved anything, it merely ignores the vibrant aspect of the tension between writing and thought. The better option is to change the scales of value, to leave the predominance of writing behind by turning towards a wider engagement with the senses, and then pass through the reorganization of the sensible and turn the passage and subsequent erasure of any established position into a critical method in itself, so as to finally view the archaeological past not in terms of *poiesis*, but as what destroys any attempt to turn man-made material reality into examples of poetry, instances of art. To my mind, there is no other viable, radical alternative to hidden writing than the reorientation enforced by erasing any traces of writing and then appreciate archaeology as an opening of man-made material reality to a wider field of intimacies, understood as experiences of and experiments with the outside, with no hitherto known or acknowledged value.

The archaeological past is simply not a text to be read, not even a facsimile. Since archaeological objects are not primarily signs, defined by and readable from their context, no perversion of writing is ever sufficient. Archaeological objects are not even merely outlines to view. They have depth and volume. Though partly ordered in earthly layers, they are foremost three-dimensional objects that mediate figural forces and wound all attempts at reading, all attempts at a hermeneutic explanation and exposition, all attempts at interpretative objectification. Some archaeological artefacts, such as heavily ornamented objects and symbolic installations, might seem to be enshrouded in their own obscure or dazzling signs and withdraw from direct contact, but the task of archaeologists is not to hold on to the sign, it is to break through the surface of the sign and release the object's figural forces in the same way an archaeological team breaks through the surface soil to reach ancient strata. To encounter the past in this way is to be confronted with an immense trauma and often even intimately afflicted by it. Though not geotrauma, it is still a trauma and should be acknowledged as such.

INTERSECTIONS

EXCLUSION

Later, while reading Ernst Jünger, it occurs to me that Land's violently nihilistic version of accelerationism and Amy Ireland's xenopoetics both split off from Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism but follow divergent trajectories. Both find their source in the analysis of a complete form of nihilism that rejects the transcendental realm of values as a measure for earthly existence. Rather, as is known from Nietzsche, values are estimated by life itself: life's valuation estimates values that are able to promote life, power enhancement and growth; with this, life shows its own desire or will to become stronger and more powerful, 'the will to power'. From here, one path forward is to evaluate Nietzsche's 'devaluation of the highest values' and bend it slightly, from an estimation of the production of life to the production of intelligence. Intelligence, not life, would henceforth be positioned as the highest value, as the measure of existence, to the point of exclusion of humanity.

Xenopoetics seems to follow a later part of the same analysis. Here the will to power is divided into the will to truth and the will to art. According to Nietzsche we risk being destroyed by the will to truth because it seeks to stabilize a world in constant change. The will to art, on the other hand, creates opportunities in which nascent life can transcend itself into a new necessary order. Because the will to power as art is the essence of life, the creation of works of art is only a special case of the will to power as art, which is inherent in every event. This is twisted, however slightly, by xenopoetics: the will to art is turned into the will to poetry inherent in technology and a total commitment to this poetry.

Techne and *poiesis*, technological production and the science of bringing something with no prior existence into being, primarily in the form of writing, are no longer opposed. They are forced together to the point of being indistinguishable. Art, in the form of poetry of technological production, is henceforth positioned as the highest aesthetic value, to the point of exclusion of humanity.

VIOLENCE

While preparing myself for a conversation with Amy Ireland, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore her bouquet of 3D-printed poems [Fig. 2]. The bouquet shows that xenopoetics can be figural. Consequently, xenopoetics must be traumatic too, to literature, to semantic and discursive concerns, and also to the writing and critique offered here. Perhaps archaeological objects are partly a kind of writing after all, if *hidden writing* is understood as hiding the *writing* part that redefines the remains of man-made material reality as figural forces and is thus similar to xeno-poems?

At first sight, Ireland's 3D poems remind me of the Nahal Mishmar hoard: a unique collection of several hundred objects, mostly in copper, deposited in a cave near the Red Sea 6,000–5,500 years ago, during the last stages of the Neolithic and the first slow-burning phase of the coming metallurgic revolution.

Several objects are like nothing seen elsewhere [Fig. 3]. The round knobs are usually described as mace heads, others are called sceptres, but there is no evidence of their actual use. The other objects are even more elusive. While some are partly figurative, their shapes for the most part do not lead to anything that can be defined in a historic way. They appear as pure objects; the violence of figural forces has reached a hitherto unknown level, and in the heat of extracting form from sensible matter, mimesis dissolves.

One should note here that to many archaeologists, the Neolithic transition marks the beginning of modernity: after a remarkable blossoming of figurative art, religious objects and cultic installations during the Epipalaeolithic came the invention of agriculture approximately 11,500 years ago, and with agriculture, the birth of a society oriented towards the future. These archaeologists consider modernity to be the result of passing thresholds of intensity in terms of population size, settlement size, the material culture and cultural practices related to harvesting, storing and processing dry seeds, and a reorientation of societal and economic organisation to handle the resulting changes. Today, the spiral of modernity has turned full circle. The Neolithic agrologistics have been pushed to the limits of environmental sustainability, and the fraying edges of modernity have begun to show. With the fraying of the edges of modernity, xenopoetics appears.

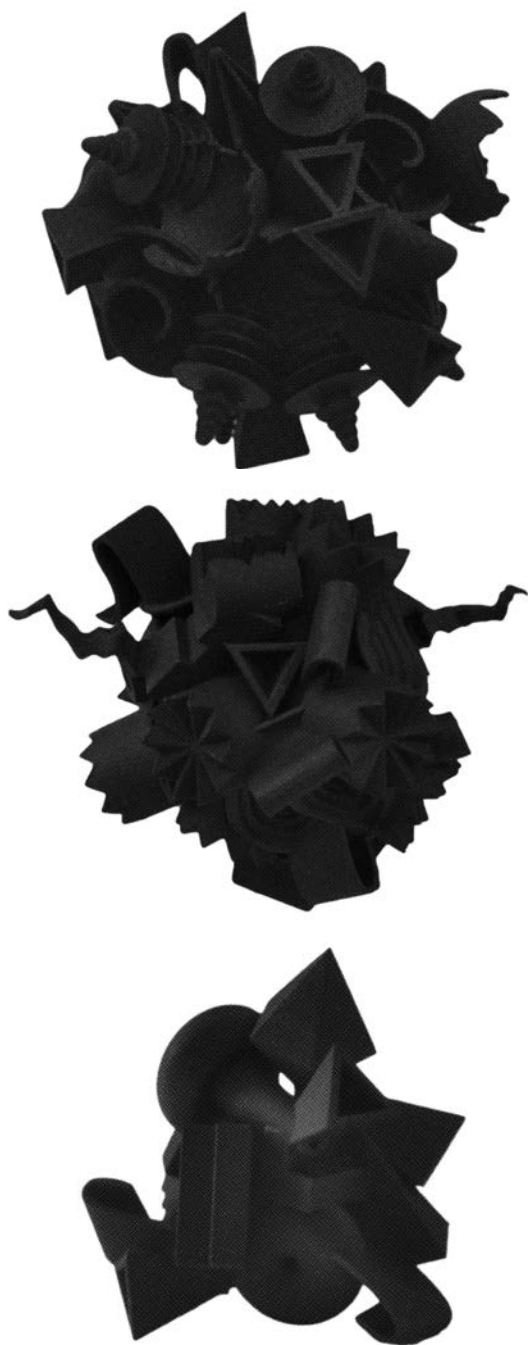


Fig. 2. Amy Ireland, 3D Poems.

In my view xenopoetics is one particular forceful practice that takes part in a wider reconfiguration of writing as figural forces. It is primarily seen in advanced contemporary literatures that integrate cultural and material contexts as part of the literary work, of the poetical *oeuvre*. While there is a general malaise in literary circles, an impatience with the traditional form of the book or perhaps a feeling of exhaustion and literary insufficiency which results in books that attempt to open up the formal aspect of the book towards more experimental possibilities, most of those attempts still work within a hierarchy of words over matter: the well-chosen word and the well-turned phrase have priority, reading and interpretation flow from one central and remarkable sentence to another, encouraging a literary criticism that is reduced to little more than an echo chamber. The crucial difference is the ability to perform a break with the hierarchy of words and sentences over matter and to integrate the techno-material dimension in a move into, for instance, performance, film, installation, digital and physical objects as elements of equal weight, equal importance: xenopoetics and related attempts to bring the techno-material dimension of the media into literary form are all drastically set apart from the common lot of desperately playful formalistic experiments by their combination of the expansion of writing to a field beyond the boundaries of the page, their sensibility for a new dynamics at force between different types of print and distribution technologies, and their realization that already the breath of the poem moves in space and affects surrounding objects – in fact, a poem could be nothing but traces left on an object.

With xenopoetics and other literary objects that move freely between performance and different media platforms and in this way invite to an engagement with a three-dimensional, if not four-dimensional space, it seems obvious that modern literature began before the advent of literature. Though the technologies differ, xenopoetics is harvesting from similar cultural fields as the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic societies of the Levant. The violence of Early Neolithic iconography shows figural forces brought to reflect on themselves and their own violence: the images have sharp teeth, show their fangs, are scratching themselves into stone with talons and claws, and crown themselves with horns [Fig. 4]. With Ireland's 3D printed poems and xenopoetics as extreme examples of 'mutant tactics' and alternatives to the tradition of close reading, literature leaves behind the archives of imaginary events and returns to an encounter with figural forces, a return that combines recollection of the ancient technicians of the sacred with front-line technological innovation.

As literature is no longer created solely as yet more texts to fill up the archives of the imaginary, it has finally gained ample speed to catch up with the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic handling of figural forces. With its specific variations on the handling of figural forces literature has in fact always been an archaeological object of a time out of reach, neither of the past nor the present, and its status as an archae-

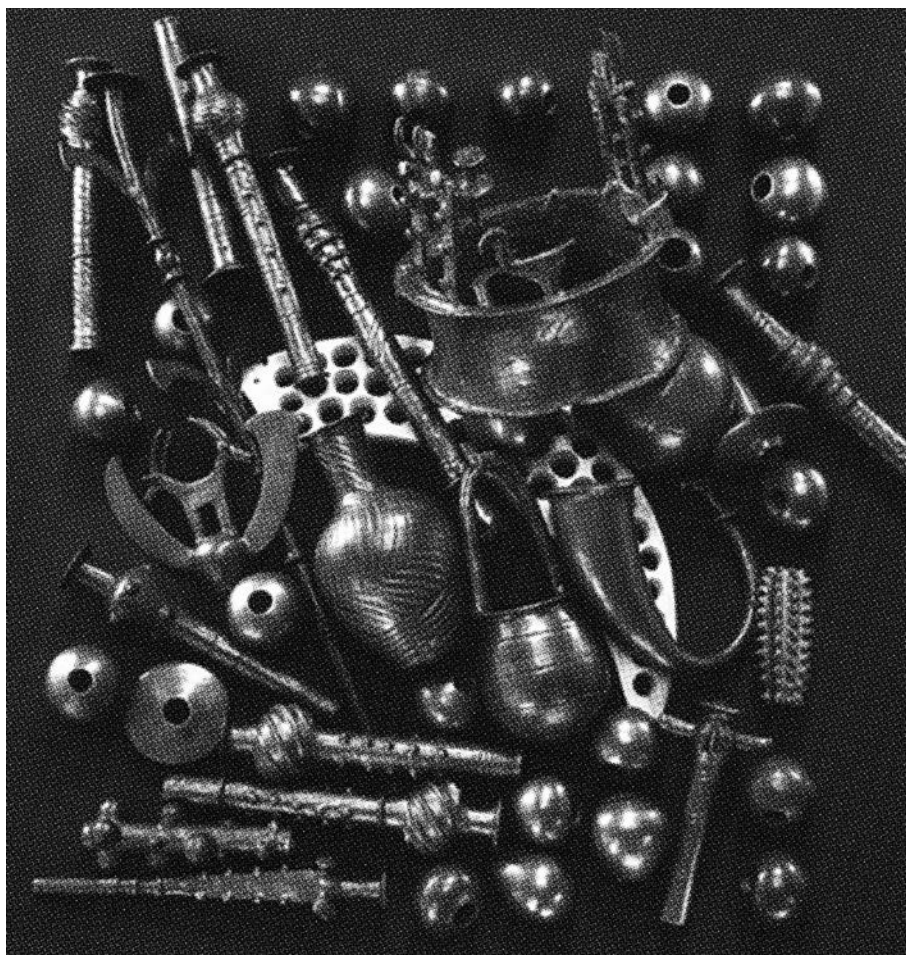


Fig. 3. From the Nahal Mishmar Hoard.

ological object is of even more weight than its status as writing, as a literature to read, as the specific and highly valued culture of creation termed *poiesis*, the quintessential model of which is still the composition of lines in a poem, sentences of varying length spread out in orderly fashion on a two-dimensional plane, each one organized, measured and broken according to human breath and vision.

POSTMODERNITY, PAST MODERNITY

If modernity began with the Neolithic, then when did postmodernity begin?

Why not simply declare that postmodernity began in the Epi-palaeolithic of the Levant? All the important traits and critical stances of postmodernism were present then, in the Natufian culture, approximately 15,000 to 11,500 years ago, leading more or less directly to the onset of the Neolithic. There is no better reason to declare that we have never been truly modern. The temporal forces have folded back on themselves already at that time. The question is not what happened in the 20th century, but what spiral was set in motion 150 centuries ago and only recently reached a point of recollection and innovation.

An intriguing aspect of the folding of temporal forces is that postmodernity will only let itself be defined after the facts of modernity have been established, though it is in fact at the very source of modernity. The common understanding of the postmodern as the period that follows modernism is no less a misunderstanding for being common sense. Two of the earliest 20th century theorists of the postmodern, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Charles Olson, both advocated such a nonlinear, non-chronological understanding of the postmodern. To Lyotard, the postmodern was a critical stance that to some sense conditioned the advent of the modern. In a similar way, Charles Olson defined a postmodern attitude some twenty years before Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition. As shown by Olson's correspondence with Robert Creeley, especially a series of letters written during an archaeological excavation in the late 1950s, Olson defined the emergent postmodernism in American poetry by making a division between feeling alienated from the past and therefore creating from a clean slate (modernism), and feeling no alienation or antagonism towards the past and therefore creating from a mixed, more confused state (postmodernism).

This, amongst other things, is what can be seen in the Levant during the transition from the Epipalaeolithic Natufian culture to the early Neolithic societies. Whereas the earliest phase of the Natufian was surprisingly progressive and modern in terms of intensifications of a plant-based subsistence economy, a sedentary lifestyle and settlement size, the later phase gradually returned to the tradition of a more nomadic lifestyle and small-scale communities. In comparison the

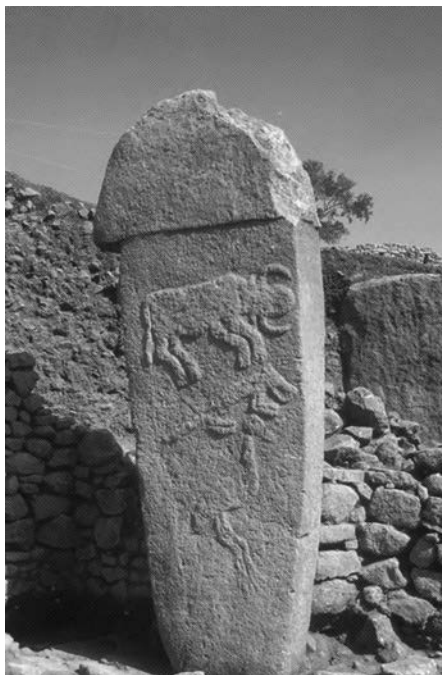
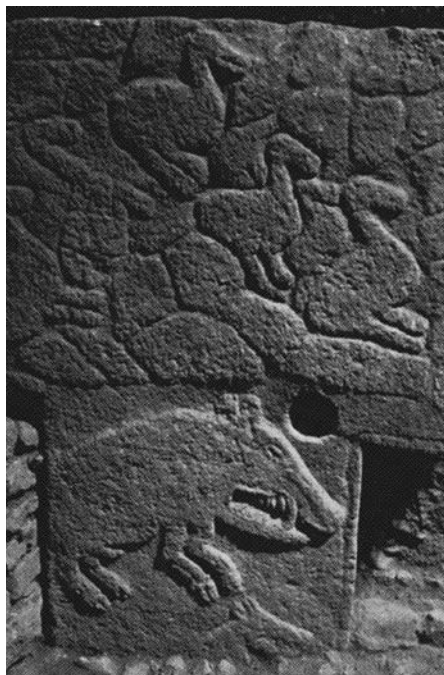


Fig. 4. Göbekli Tepe.

earliest Neolithic societies gradually erased the traces of past traditions, until they had a clean plate on which to build a new society, the material aspect of which were fields covered in ash from the burning of forests, bush and brushwood.

Now, it might be best to talk about these two instances of archaic modernity and archaic postmodernity as the undersides of modernity and postmodernity that only much later, and then not entirely simultaneously, broke through the surface soil which then, in the late 20th century, brutally collapsed and left the edges of modernity frayed. The important thing in this context is that the collapse brings with it a new clarity in which to read Olson's correspondence with Creeley, primarily as a call to review the dual nature of the postmodern as it reveals itself in American poetry and French philosophy before the arrival of the international carnival of Laissez-faire Postmodernism Inc. in art and architecture.

BORDERLINE AESTHETICS

Olson's furious and enthusiastic letter writing suggests one way of approaching the dawn of a new clarity: to confront philosophy, literary theory and poetics with the human past as unearthed by archaeology, and to challenge the existing practices of writing during and after an archaeological excavation, not just to open up a new space for writing, but also to explore and experiment with other ways of reacting to an excavation site as a place defined by the crossing lines of different aesthetic, cultural, societal and material forces, and as a model for any space that is defined in such terms.

As an alternative to reading, archaeological knowledge can be described as navigation in the spatial layers of a cultural landscape. In a similar manner, aesthetic knowledge can be described as navigation in imaginary spaces of images, colours, forms, volumes, sounds, and theoretical knowledge as a system of navigation in a conceptual space. The narrative of a traditional archaeological analysis and interpretation would then define a line of navigation in a specific archaeological material, its strata and its context, just as the narratives of the history of art would define lines of navigation through different examples of art. Instead of keeping these lines apart, Olson can be used as a guide for an encounter with the different lines of navigation, an experiment with and an examination of the possibilities of writing archaeology as a narrative that ties together different lines of archaeological, aesthetic and theoretical knowledge.

By engaging with, reviewing and tracing how the participants in an excavation navigate *in* the restricted space of the excavation site and then navigate *with* the tools and techniques of their respective trades, the end product of the experiment would be a new sense of writing in archaeology, and a new aesthetics of archaeology as fundamental research.



Fig. 5. Infant skeleton, Shubayqa.

What is meant by fundamental research is an inquiry that is situated *at the limits* of the media that belong to the domains that hold its concern. In this way, we are led to re-examine the meaning of notions and borderlines that are fundamental to the respective disciplines of the humanities and frequently cut across others (the nature of art, its place in society, the meaning of historical facts, the institution of law, the grounds of meaning etc.), and universal notions bearing on the nature of being human (birth, death, freedom, desire, community etc.).

All archaeological sites where these lines intersect present a unique opportunity to develop a dialogue between general, theoretic frameworks, the specific, material culture, the sensual qualities of the material culture and the broader socio-economic, political and religious context of an area. In these intersections, encounters with past intelligence take place. Though they do not lead to the radical unsettling of human thought and self-conception promised by the encounter with a future AI or alien life-forms, encounters with past intelligence unearth what is radically human and how to comprehend intelligence outside known references [Fig. 5].

In this context, recourse to a, at root, racist anthropological vocabulary of totems, status, symbolism, and fetishism, which in itself makes totems, symbols and fetishes from archaeological finds by treating them as objects that primarily count as emblems of social groups in the past and guarantees the organic unity of these groups, can be eliminated, or at least be subordinated to a secondary position by applying the notion of cities as intelligent, sentient entities. The notion of cities as sentient beings whose life cycles follow different and larger time scales than nations and individuals is directly applicable on archaeological sites where intelligence emerges as the sum of unfamiliar codes and unfamiliar structural and material patterns and changes detected in a long-term perspective.

FRAGMENTARY LESSONS

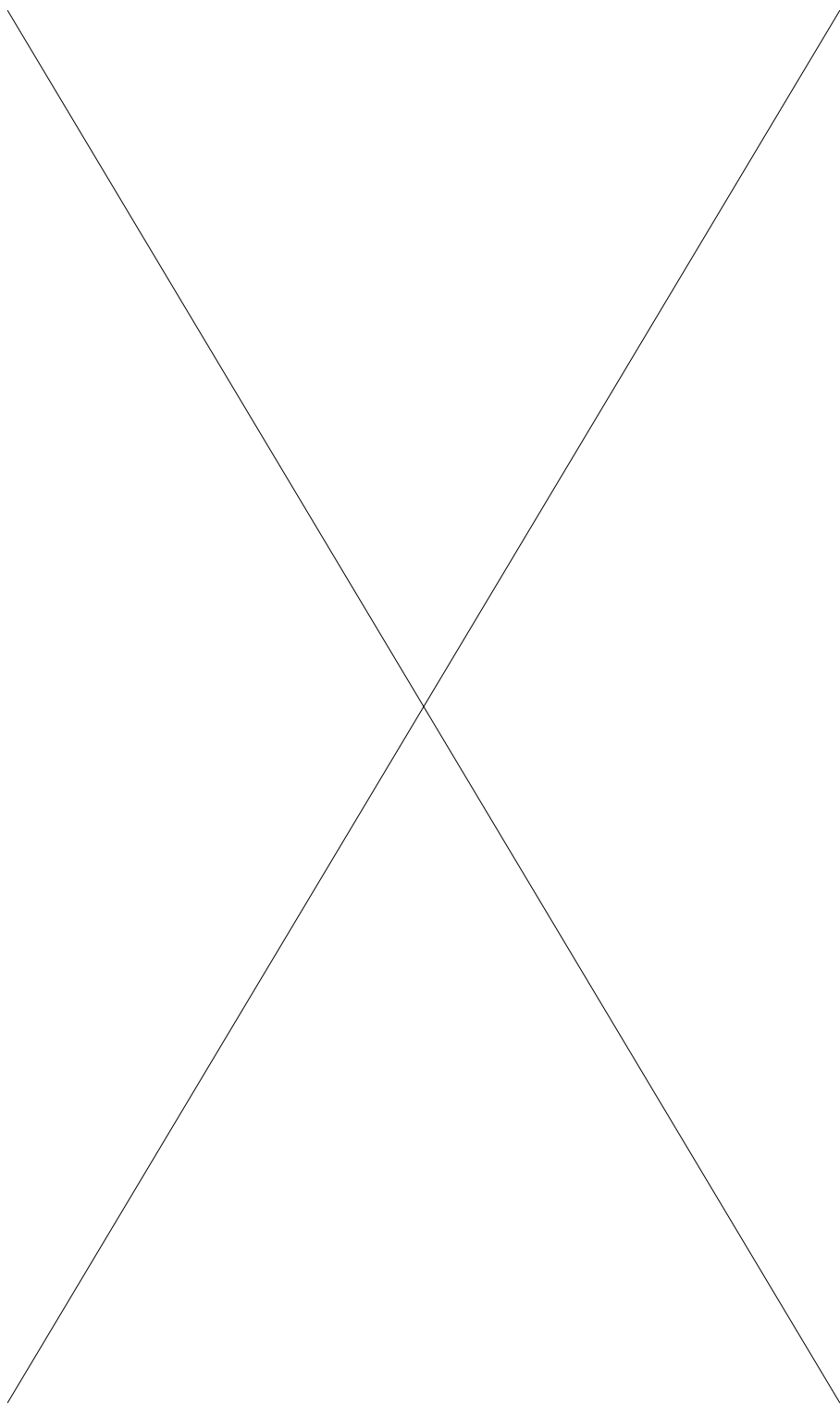
The archaeological experience as outlined above borders on a critical problem, namely how to turn the excavation of *archaeological finds and objects that have no relation to writing*, not even as analogy, into an engagement with the finds and objects *in a form of writing that has nothing to do with writing*. At the core of this absurdity lies the following unsettling question: does archaeological experience have to be translated into a communicable and recognisable language?

Whereas literary studies have drawn a radical lesson from the innovative use of fragmentation, disruption, disjunction, agrammatical syntax, and nonlinear narrative in the 20th-century traditions of modernist and avant-garde literature – namely that contemporary literary culture needs to recognize other forms of writing as critical and grant them some measure of authority in academic institutions – archaeological

writing generally fails to engage with the question of fragmentation. In fact, there are only a few important examples of approaches to archaeological and anthropological writings inspired by lessons from modern aesthetics. Since archaeology actively deals with fragmentation in its reconstruction of past events, it seems of critical importance for archaeology to re-examine its own ways of writing, the narrative structures it relies on, the ideal of reconstruction it frequently adheres to, and how to incorporate the experience of other disciplines into an ongoing dialogue between general and specific problematics, between abstract thought and concrete, material practice.

Hopefully the dialogue will make it possible to re-enter a greater field of intimacies with the intelligent machinery inherent in past organizations of society. At least it is not the archaeological past understood as a kind of hidden writing with several authors working on the same material on different time planes. A good description does not suffice, though. Rather, navigation, fragmentation and dialogue will push the writings of archaeologists towards writing that goes against writing, a redistribution of the sensible that tears itself away from poetry, from the dispositions and values of poetry: creation through destruction. The trowel stuck into the ground already engages archaeologists in a creative destruction, the planned destruction of the archaeological site that brings to light the fragile fragments, dust and bones of the past, so often dismissed by a philosophy deeply concerned with the archive of human knowledge, but with little concern for human ways of living and dying.

As is often said, archaeological interpretation begins at the trowel's edge. By their own practice, archaeologists are forced to reflect on their role in what is simultaneously a destruction and a reconstruction of the past unfolding in the present. It is as if the blade of the trowel were a mirror reflecting the archaeologist's outlook. At the same time the trowel emits sounds when it scrapes away dirt or hits upon something hard buried in softer soil, sounds to which the archaeologist must pay attention. Rather than a mirror, the metal blade is actually a tuning instrument that brings to life dead voices and the tones of subterranean bells.



AS ALIEN AS BIRD SONG

PROGRAM

On my way to meet Amy Ireland, the fundamentals of xenopoetics run through my head.

Xenopoetics developed in parallel with or as a divergence from xenofeminism. Xenofeminism is a technomaterialism that seeks to foreground the material elements of interaction in contemporary culture. It draws upon engagements with the digital that foreground the brute physicality of digital culture over its supposedly more ethereal qualities. In other words, xenofeminism does not consider information more essential, fundamental or important than materiality. On the contrary, material and immaterial components are interdependent: the infrastructures in which technology and media emerge, their design histories and social contexts all place limits upon technology's transformational implications. One example of xenofeministic practice is hormonal self-medication understood as an act of autoexperimentation without preconceived goals or ideal outcomes.

From this common basis, xenopoetics takes off as an experiment in moving beyond the internal limits of imagination imposed by the human nervous system and the external limits imposed by technology and media. To pursue experiences that elude human grasp and comprehension, xenopoetics cultivates a wide arsenal of technological, numerological, magical, shamanistic and occult programmes that put pressure on human perceptual and cognitive equipment. As such, it has no place or concern for the individual subject, for lyrical expression, for a personal narrative: the ablation of judgement is 'the poetic equivalent

of removing a tumour', the lyrical is 'the enemy', and narrative is just another word for 'a control program'.

REMEDIES

If xenopoetics is an experiment in moving beyond the internal limits of imagination, what are the limits of xenopoetics, the internal limits and the external limits, the productive and the counter-productive limits?

'What calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents herself by dying.' These words come to mind, and though it feels like a forbidden territory, a direction the vocabulary of xenopoetics is heavily discouraging me from following, the words encourage me to put the basics of xenopoetics to the test and contrast them with the banality of life on technological life support, the near-death experience of a cancer patient, as revealed by a personal horror story.

A year ago, my younger sister went through severe surgery several times, both planned and emergency procedures. As a person with special needs, she has relied on special support all her life. Though not diagnosed as such, she is probably in the spectrum of high-functioning Asperger's. What she has been diagnosed with, but only around her late 20s, early 30s, is ADD, the passive, inattentive form of the more commonly known ADHD. As a result, she has lived most of her life as an alien in her own body. Then, in her late 30s, she was diagnosed with cancer. What stood out most violently from her experience of hospital life was the harm to her bodily integrity: after almost forty years with her brain working against her, now her cells were working against her, too. Rather than the state of integrity praised by Western society, she lived in a state of accelerated interior disintegration. After the first operation and then several emergency operations – to which she protested, but was given no real choice, as she was in imminent danger of dying from organ failure – she was put in medically induced coma for several days. When she woke up, she was no longer herself, in the sense that something was taken away from her that she will have to live without for the rest of her life. Not only was she completely drained of any remaining strength, she also had to accept a foreign object into her body, replacing the organic tissue cut out of her, and the extra personal care required by it. In addition, there were the standard medical remedies and tubes and the experience of nurses forcing themselves on her to do their job, she herself being without the means to protest, she could only cry out in despair.

Does the pressure of such experience – to be that close to death, hooked up on machinery that keeps you alive – push one towards xenopoetry, too, though without any poetry to it, without anything to affirm

or celebrate? This state left her with nothing but the wish to cling onto life in the simplest, most banal sense and slowly, slowly slide back into comprehensible experience. Is there a challenge to the philosophical nihilism inherent in xenopoetics in her experience? Or is there something to be channelled from her experiences of hospital life to the experimental laboratory of xenopoetics and from xenopoetics to hospital life? Do they affect each other? How?

There is, of course, a huge difference between what is forced on you and what you force on yourself, xenopoetics presumably being closer to the latter, at least to the extent that it cultivates strategies for experience. Still, is that difference the issue here?

CONTRAST AGENT

Xenopoetics is not concerned with ‘nuances between different modes of ego dissolution’, it values ‘experimentation over human preservation’, and ‘takes pleasure in watching us die’. Xenopoetics boldly declares: prepare to be ‘devoured by the experiment’, to be ‘a host for parasites’, to be ‘opened by outside forces rather than being open to them’, don’t shy away from ‘the ecstasy of the digital scroll’s meltdown of the mind’s capacity to reflect or focus, comparable only to the unimaginable rapture of experiencing the body being cut into pieces whilst still functioning’ ...

While it is difficult to abstract from the dark romanticism in these formulaic expressions, neither their coldness, darkness nor romantic overtones are acceptable reasons to be in any way dismissive of xenopoetics. On the contrary, the xenopoetic practice of direct confrontation with technology and new conceptions of reality is extremely important. To my knowledge, there is no better contrast to the widespread novelistic literature which leaves no doubt that the authors study the news closely and write their books to fill the contemporary archives of imaginary events. Similarly, it is hardly difficult to accept that a control program can be found in every personal horror story. Still, the control program of my personal horror story steers me in a direction where the incapacity to differentiate sufficiently between abstract and concrete planes of meaning, between the rhetorical use of metaphors and the literal sense of a sentence, makes of me the equivalent to a contrast agent injected into a foreign body. Does the physicality of the xenopoetic theoretical vocabulary guarantee against idealism and romanticism if thought, cognition, perception, ideas of self and agency are all much more affected than life on the level of the body? For all the talk about disenchantment with the separation of thought and practice in the academic milieu, it seems poetic experiments, a poetical laboratory life and an only partly affected life of the body outside the laboratory still exist. To strip the plane of its own metaphors, is the body a barrier xenopoetics has to break down, too?

INHUMANISM AS INCLUSIVE HUMANISM

According to Helen Hester, xenofeminism strives to foster a form of mutational politics, one that can be oriented towards a radical practice of hospitality. That just leaves me with more questions:

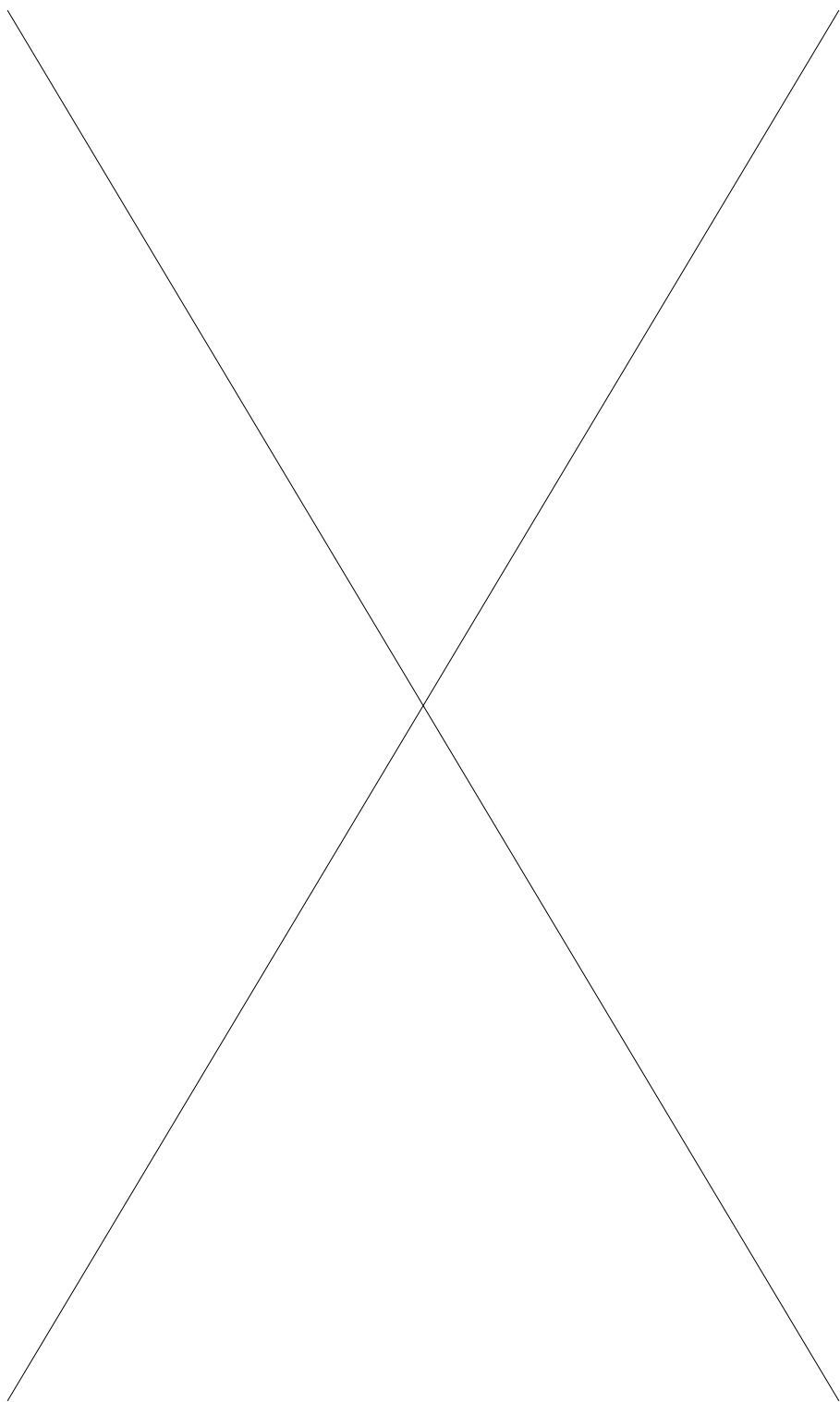
Are xenofeminism and xenopoetics actually incompatible? If xenofeminism positions its own sense of inhumanism as a radically inclusive humanism that seeks to reintegrate into the collective experience the one who has been radically changed because of some sense of xenoexperience, what kind of a collective experience or community is it? One already given and only partially affected by xenoexperience?

As processes of transformation unfold in time, they can, to a certain point, go both ways: back towards human integrity or forwards to inhuman assimilation. There must be a point in time from which a retreat to human experience and an unmutated body and mind is still possible, and another, later point of no return, otherwise both xenofeminism and xenopoetics would be calls for self-mutilation. Would xenopoeticism sheer away from self-mutilation as a productive measure? Xenofeminism's mutational politics and xenohospitality seem to belong to a time after the point of no return is reached, after one undergoes a xenoexperience, by intention or by accident, after which they carefully take over. Xenopoetics, on the other hand, could easily be placed before the point of no return but lacks the resources to change the direction of its own trajectory. It seems to me that in its pursuit of ego dissolution, xenopoetics must at least disregard the instances of empathy or hospitality and claim a kind of a community into which there can be no reintegration, a community where there is no risk of being excluded from and later reintegrated into it, namely a community only produced by xenoexperience, a community at the moment of disintegration.

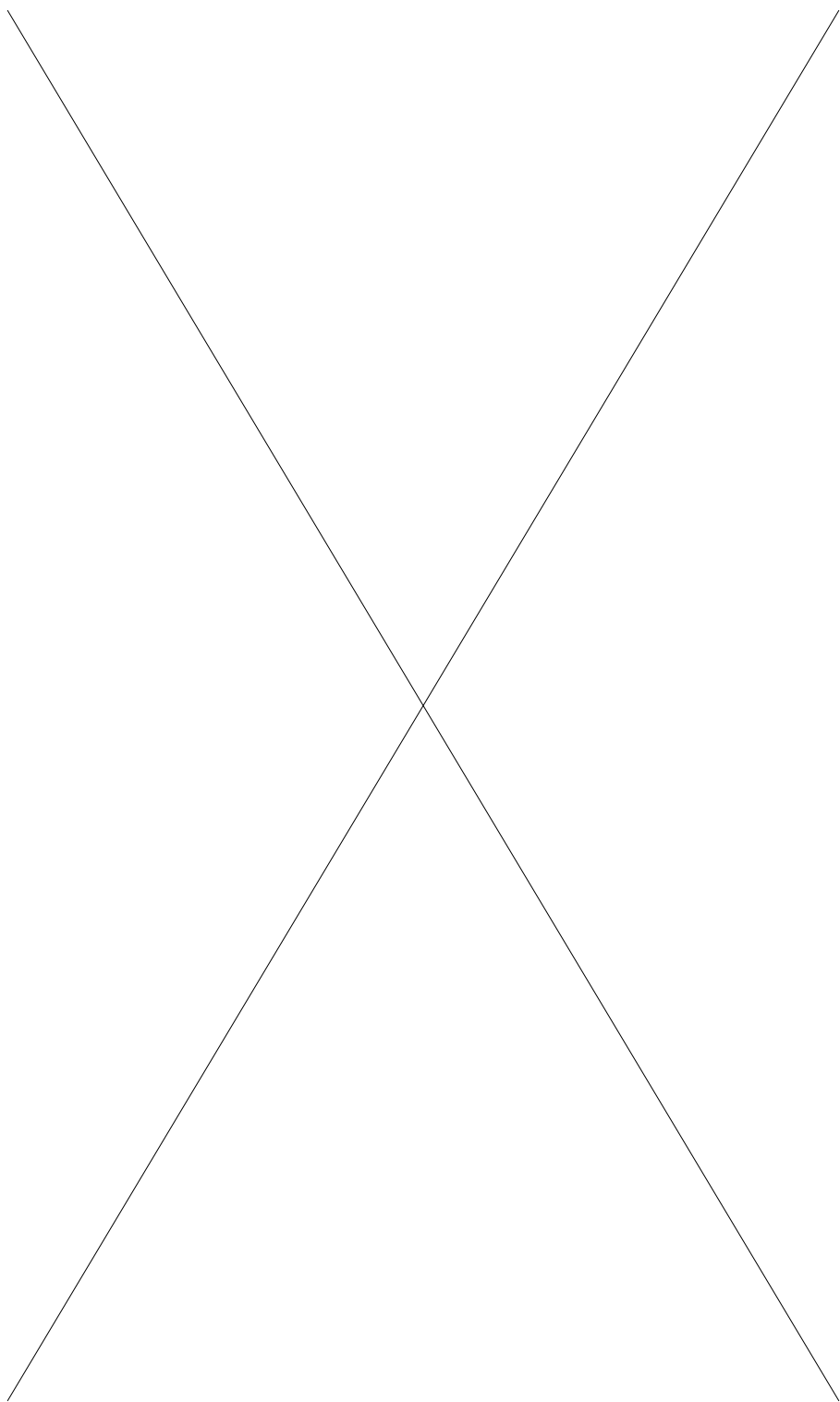
BIRD SONG

When Amy Ireland turns towards me on the corner of Guangxi Li II, these questions and misconceptions are all swarming in my head; while we circle the perimeter of the People's Park in conversation, they gradually fade away. Then, as we say goodbye, a slight sensorial disturbance seems to rise and flow in the air. It is only much later that the disturbance makes itself felt as the sense of something gone wrong, perhaps only in the last words of a farewell. With every attempt to recreate the scene in memory, it lights up as a blinding white spot. Others might think of the white spot as a metaphor, to me it is real. It is my secret, my own internal limit, and a shared trait with my sister and our kin. In a deleted scene from *Blade Runner*, the replicant Roy mistakes the recorded voice in a lift for his mother's voice and desperately clings to the speaker

and the lit control panel. That is how it is for some of us. We are blinded by the light emanating from other people. We are the faded ones. To us, the sound of other people's conversation is as alien as bird song.



CONVERSATIONS
WITH
ANNA
GREENSPAN
& NICK LAND



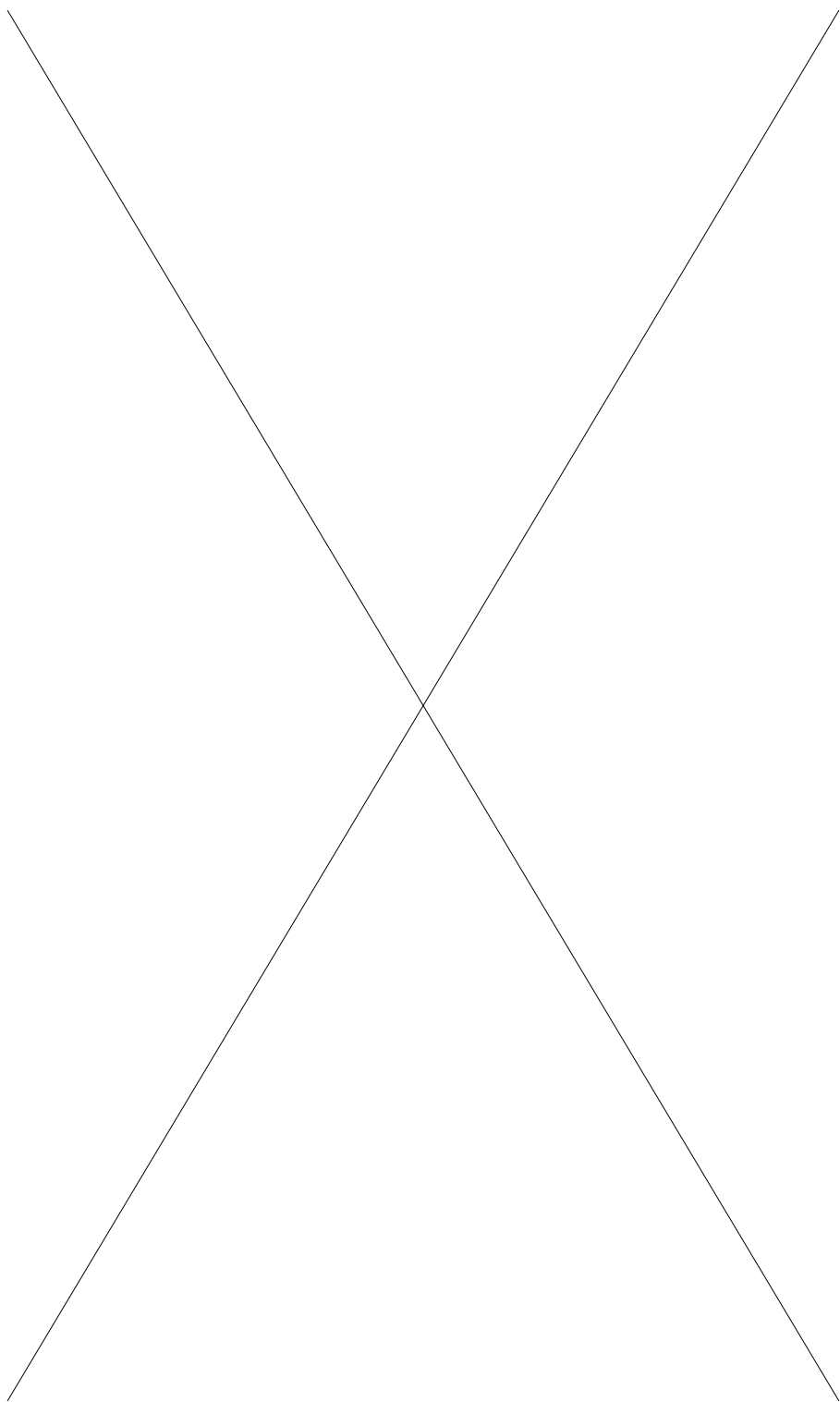
– But, good heavens, we know nothing about the future!
– No, but there is a thing or two to be said about it all the same.
Henrik Ibsen

We have reached a period where evolutionary history ceases to make sense unless we understand it in reverse ... There is no way out, no sideways, no backward; what matters, rather, is to increase the force and speed of the processes by which we have been gripped.
Ernst Jünger

Everyone that walks through a city at night walks in the present, while everyone who walks through a city during the day walks in the past or the future.
Giacinto Scelsi

Capital burns off the nuance in a culture.
Don DeLillo

Money is becoming very esoteric. All waves and codes. A higher kind of intelligence. Travels at the speed of light.
Don DeLillo



ZONES OF EXPERIMENTATION

Mikkel Bindslev A few words to introduce you, Anna.

You were involved with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Ccru) along with, amongst others, Sadie Plant, Nick Land, Mark Fisher, Steve Goodman, Suzanne Livingston and Luciana Parisi. In your PhD, *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* (2000), you argue that the nature of time is not some eternal given that has descended from above but a process that is itself continuously under production. Through a meticulous analysis of Kant's transcendental philosophy, the history of mechanical methods of time keeping and the philosophy of time in Deleuze and Guattari's *A 1000 Plateaus*, you show that mutations or radical discontinuities in the thought of time and the material practice of time follow from both the Kantian and the capitalist revolution. You conclude that to overcome discontinuity it is necessary to explore singular events without distinguishing between time and that which occurs in time. Your example is the anticlimax of Y2K.

In the early new millennium, you relocated to Shanghai and have since published a book entitled *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade* (2014). It's described as a book on the foldings of time, spirals, things turned inside out, empty spaces, mirages, densities, and endless subdivisions of space in Shanghai, all of which act as catalysts for Chinese neomodernity. Most importantly, the book introduces the time spiral as a temporal model for understanding Chinese neomodernity. On a more general level, I think *Shanghai Future* is concerned with the conditions for the emergence of the new in the early 21st century. You contrast two models: Modernity 1.0, the 20th-century modernist model of top-down

planning, where the new is built from scratch, and Modernity 2.0 or neomodernity, where top-down planning encounters various disturbances, various turbulences in the process, and the new emerges from a mixed state rather than from a clean slate. At the same time, there is a bottom-up growth from the already mixed state of street life which already affected and disturbed Modernity 1.0. Then you develop, as I understand it, a similar model for capitalism and the creative potential of economic order and disorder: on the one hand there is top-down planning and regulation, monopolies, big business; on the other hand there are the small markets, the grey economy functioning at an intermediate level between the illegal black market of crime and corporate economy, grassroots financing, and the shanzhai economy with its production of disruptive technology that combines piracy with improvement and innovation. As you explain, the most important vector in mapping the Asian megacity is not the density of the population but the intensity of economic transactions, and in Asian megacities that intensity is located at the bottom levels.

Now, where is the time spiral localized in this? Is it the mixed state, the turbulence, the disturbances, or are there rather two simultaneous time spirals: the passive result of disturbances and the active force of the experimental social body found at street level? Is there actually a vortex of small and large time spirals?

Anna Greenspan Probably the easiest and most general way to get at the time spiral idea is just as an attempt to escape the dichotomy between a stereotypical conception of Western temporality, based on the modernist notion of a straight-line progressive time, and the stereotypical Chinese mode of temporality, which is based on the cyclical mode. Both these stereotypes are oversimplified, of course. It is not the case that China doesn't have its own cultures and traditions of linear time (in ancestor worship and genealogical lineages, for example.) Yet, though there are all sorts of ways in which China manifests linear time, there is still a strong sense in which it, in certain ways, favours the cyclical idea. At least that's the way both Western thinkers like Marx and Hegel thought about China, and also Chinese thinkers in the May 4th movement that wanted to disrupt China's own processes and criticize the way China kept being entwined in these repeating cycles. So the spiral is something that is able to describe these things, without being caught on either side. I guess part of your question is where does planning belong. My initial thought is that the disruptions are what helps produce the spiral. Something has to be sort of pushed off kilter in order for it to not just be in a kind of repeating loop forever. So maybe that is one way of thinking about this, that these disturbances produce the spiral. But you know, you write a book, and then it takes a long time to come out and then, by the time it comes out you've sort of forgotten it. You have moved along with time. The thing I'm working on now has to do with time waves. So this conversation is a good occasion to really think

about how that might feed into the idea of the time spiral. It's a similar sort of thought, of trying to disrupt that kind of straight line of time. It's based on another kind of Chinese temporal orientation, which seems to be towards this rise and fall of time.

MB Is the time spiral meant to change our perception of China?

AG No, I don't think so. I'm more interested in trying to think about the future and it's just that China happens to be at the cusp of the future. I certainly think at this moment it's really crucial to engage with China and its material productions and also its intellectual history. If you're interested, as I am, in thinking about the future I think you have to engage with China. China is obviously playing a pretty key role at the moment. It's too big to ignore. So part of it gets into questions like, 'how do we think about Chinese Modernity.' But for me those kinds of questions are subordinate to the larger question: What can this engagement with China tell us? What does it unlock, in terms of thinking about processes of change and about the future and about time?

MB In the book you state that Chinese neomodernity forces us to re-write or re-evaluate Western ideas about modernity.

AG Obviously there is a very strong kind of planning, a very familiar sort of planning story that's taking place in Shanghai. It's not like that doesn't exist here. And since I wrote the book that force has become even stronger. But I still think the basic premise of it is correct. What we are seeing unfold here is something quite different. Though it might have these familiar strains, it's not like we've seen all this before. What's your interest in this?

MB Well, I come from archaeology, so it is natural for me to think about how to bring the distant past and thought closer together, how to establish links between material culture and abstract thought. To me, your work is an encouragement to search for such links in new, inventive ways.

AG The intimate connection between past and future is obvious in the Chinese case because the oracle bones are a foundational archaeological finding and because the I-Ching is such an important foundational text. In both of these interrelated examples there is a very strong sense of a deep time that is already disturbed. The past was already really disrupted. I definitely think that's the case, and I think that the importance of the I-Ching can't be overstated. This idea of time waves, which as I said I'm working on now, is really immersed in a modern take up of the I-Ching. That the past is already about the future is something quite significant and interesting.

MB The idea of the time spiral seems to mark a new concern for the past in yours and Nick's work; if it's not exactly mentioned for the first time, then it is certainly more pronounced than before. It seems like a culmination of previous different attempts to break with linear time models, for instance in the Ccru.

AG The Ccru was certainly interested in ideas of deep time.

MB All the Ccru work on the deep past and geotrauma is about the inhuman past. The historical past seems to have gained more importance both in your own and in Nick's more recent work.

AG Probably a part of it has to do with the engagement with intellectual history. When you're engaged as a Westerner with Western intellectual history you're assuming a certain past without it really being explicit. Whatever philosophy you're interested in is in a conversation with its own past automatically. So there may be something just about trying to engage with another tradition that you're not as familiar with. You recognize that there's this long conversation that you have to dive into straight away. For example, in my current work I'm trying to engage with these modern Chinese philosophers. There's no way of doing that without understanding how they themselves are engaging with their own intellectual history and speaking through this intellectual history. Maybe it's true that Ccru was interested in this cataclysmic idea of deep time or geotrauma but not necessarily in history. I don't know, I would have to think more about that.

MB I detect much more sympathy, if that word isn't too subjective or emotional, for the grey economy of Shanghai as a force of neomodernity than for the visible signs of growth: the visually attractive architecture. The implication, as I understand it, is that the actual historical forces don't attract attention. They are invisible, they are working in the shadows, they are elusive and actually thrive in partial or full shade.

AG For me this idea that there are these separate forces emerged from a lot of Ccru-based discussions, which came out of DeLanda and Braudel. To me the dichotomy that Braudel presents is really crucial: capitalism as distinct from, but coexisting with the economy of the markets. The dichotomy between large companies married to the state, and the street market bottom-up economy, seems very much alive. The distinction is very visible in the Asian metropolis, sometimes painfully visible. If you explore further around where we just walked, you can see the remains of these street markets and then, just across the street, a gigantic development by one of the biggest and most important real estate developers of Shanghai. You can just watch them coming. You see bulldozers that are like monstrous dinosaurs just ripping up the street and creating new high-end shopping malls and apartment buildings. So

that dichotomy in the making of the city of the future is very much alive. After I wrote the book, I did a whole study of street food, which since then has almost completely disappeared in Shanghai. It has pretty much been wiped out in the process of, or in the name of, a kind of 'civilized' Chinese modernity. Nevertheless, there are questions that remain: Are they gone for good? Will they come back and if so in what form? What happens to the people and to the food? It is like a cat and mouse game of suppression and eruption. You don't know how that's going to play out over time. Right now, the forces of suppression and the general formalization of Shanghai have massively increased.

MB You state, I think it is in the preface, that street food is one of the most essential aspects of city life. Why is that?

AG Street food is important for all sorts of reasons. First, from the point of view of the producers it's a very easy job for the newly urbanized migrants to the city. In Western cities street food (at least the best street food) is almost always produced by migrants from elsewhere. In China it is internal migrants. Newly arrived migrants sell street food for socio-economic reasons. So it provides employment to the urban poor but it also provides cheap food and this can be especially important for working women. The other crucial thing it does is give life to the street. The street is this critical zone that is neither like a public square nor private like a shopping mall. So it allows for exactly these kinds of disturbances you asked about. Where in a city can you have those disturbances, where is the room for experimentation, for openings? It seems to me that the street is where those things take place. It is why cyberpunk is interested in the street. So street food is crucial for the production of street life. This is why the Party has been so keen on destroying it. It is out of control. It's a zone that's not used to being controlled. To me those dynamics between the formal and the informal are still really critical. It's hard to think about how those things play out in cyber economy.

MB And what about art? What you write about art is almost all about spaces, such as empty warehouses, that were meant to be very productive areas ...

AG These zones of experimentation have also almost all disappeared.

MB It sounds like art, potentially, is important for the same reasons as street food.

AG Yeah, this kind of production of culture. I think that being able to experiment is important. The process of creating the future does not just arrive as a plan from above. It has to emerge through some sort of zones of experimentation. So a place that eliminates all space for exper-

imentation is highly problematic.

MB One impression I got from the book was that empty spaces with no practical use are the zones that attract the future, whereas the high-rise buildings are more illusions of the future.

AG I mean, I like high-rise buildings. I think they provoke imagination. They are a part of an urban imaginary. But the problem with them is they don't leave space for play and experimentation. I'm really drawn to follow Jane Jacobs in this regard. I think her idea about play is right. You have to have some sort of undirected play to just see what emerges. If we knew what was emerging, then it wouldn't be a production of the future. For people that are interested in urban life and the built environment, it's really not that hard to have skyscrapers and street life together. I don't know why this is so difficult for people. It just seems to me to be no problem at all. You just allow both of those things to co-exist together. For some reason that seems to be very difficult.

MB I went to the Bund the other day, and the skyline really is other-worldly.

AG Yes, I love that, that sort of urban imaginary, and obviously some of the main towers are amazing pieces of cultural production. They are just astonishing. I hope there are more of those coming. Part of what I like about them is that wherever you are in the city, they shift. They are these immense sculptural shapeshifters. I also like them because they add life to the street. You can be just walking down the street here or wherever, and there they are, these amazing design features. They absolutely contribute to street life. It just seems obvious to me that you don't have to choose one or the other. I don't know why it always ends up as a choice between one or the other. I don't have some great insight about it. I think it's just simply about crude real estate economics.

MB What kind of a relationship do you see between the culture of shadow markets and the practices of the Ccru? The Ccru was also an experiment in creating, if not a place or site, then conditions for the emergence of the new.

AG I haven't been there for about eight months, and I know Shenzhen is undergoing some of the same top-down planned development. But in Shenzhen there are still these spaces of really intense street life that are just the closest thing, at least that I have seen, to real cyberpunk, what cyberpunk actually looks and feels like. In that way I think there is a sort of feeding off of similar cultural forces or thoughts. The Ccru was also interested in cyberculture from a perspective that was exterior to the Californian Silicon Valley point of view.

MB If we could speak a bit about the aesthetics of the Ccru writings, which often seem based on rewriting and copying other writers until they lost all individual identity.

AG We were very into sampling and remixing, and as you know music, jungle in particular, was an enormous influence. Nick and Mark especially were really into this ethos of sampling. Mark was really a genius at it. In that sense, for sure, I think there was a certain plane of experimentation and a question about what it is to sample and remix and allow for the emergence of the new.

MB And creating something not from a clean slate but by mixing. And that's the same in ...

AG In the shanzhai economy. In the shanzhai economy it's just let's grab stuff from everywhere. Definitely there's a similarity there.

MB Yet another spiral is the wandering populations of China, the circular flow between their life in the villages and work in Shanghai. In terms of recollection and invention, this mode of living is a spiral, too: they are harvesting from the past, bringing it to the city, they are bringing money and experiences from the city back to the villages and in process modifying both. Rather than the traditional idea about a modern conflict between the mobile life of the nomads and the settled life in the city, the circular flow of the wandering population reveals a tension and opens a third front or dimension of modernity.

AG This is the idea that there is a new mode of urbanization which I think is very unknown because we're only in the second generation of migrants. So the relationship they will sustain with the village is still unclear. But there certainly seems to be some suggestion that theirs is a circulatory mode of living. I think of that as really interesting. I'm really interested in that also from the perspective of how they are thought of as the 'floating population', the whole way of thinking about the city as more about water than solid matter. The ground of the city, especially a city like Shanghai, is actually very fluid so even though we know this is not right we tend to think of cities as stable and landlocked. You know, almost all global urbanization happens in delta regions, despite global warming. So on the one hand there is a kind of core narrative about the rising sea level, on the other hand there is a pretty clear migration pattern. Everyone's just going into the delta regions. Think about Shanghai's population. I used to think that 25 million was the figure, but apparently, it's more like 30, 25 million being the official figure. And of course, the area around Hong Kong is a similar kind of just crazed intense urbanization taking place around the rivers and the sea.

MB It's fascinating that the origins of civilization are found in sim-

ilar regions, the cradle of civilization: the first great cities in the delta regions of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Asia. Initially it of course had to do with trade and the fertility of the soil. Why is it still like that?

AG It is somewhat curious in the sense that there is the other really pretty strong core narrative about rising sea levels.

MB Humans are just drawn towards catastrophe.

AG Maybe that's part of it. But I think it is also just this sense that the future is more about that which can float. There's a tendency to seek higher land, to seek stronger foundations but there is also another tendency that drifts towards more fluid foundations. What happens when you know the ground is more fluid? As I said, to me it's interesting that internal migrants in China are known as a floating population. They themselves are not understood to be solid and tied to the ground of the city. In some way they are imagining a new kind of urban existence with more ties to water than to land. Maybe that's also something to think about with regards to these time questions. There is probably a whole bunch of stuff in there that needs unpacking but that has to do with the flows and currents of the rivers and the seas. So thinking about how water marks time is perhaps quite relevant.

MB In *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* you quote Deleuze saying that with Kant 'time unrolls itself like a sort of serpent'. I think the quote works really well when juxtaposed with a description of traditional garden architecture from the Urbanatomy Shanghai guidebook: 'In most Chinese gardens, halls lead into pavilions that lead onto rockeries or lakes with no distinct end in sight. Not only does this help in the perpetual flight from evil spirits (trapped by their linear thinking) but also it creates an illusion of expanse.' It almost sounds like the time spiral is an evocation of evil spirits.

AG I haven't engaged with that Deleuze text in a really long time, but I do think it's amazing. Amy was talking about it the other day and about the revolving door as a way of thinking about time. There is also the picture on the cover of Kant's *Critique*, the Ouroboros [Fig. 6]. So Kant could have taken the serpent as a sort of profound image. I mean, Chinese gardens are very literally about guiding evil spirits. The zig-zag bridge is about trying to deceive the evil spirits by going in zigzags. That's very cool in Feng Shui, too. There's a story that all the buildings in Hong Kong are influenced by Feng Shui, they're supposed to allow for the positives in these kinds of cosmic cycles, they are built to block negative energies and allow for the passages of certain unseen forces.

MB Central to *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* is the idea that the ultimate capitalist product is time. The historical development



Fig. 6. Kant and the Ouroboros.

from what is produced by time and in the flux and changes of time to the production of time itself is at the heart of capitalism, as you see it, and not the monetary system as is commonly assumed.

AG Again, I'm just going to talk about what I'm working on currently. I'm teaching a course on media theory and yesterday one of the students screened a film called 'All that is Solid Melts into Data'. It was about data centres and low-latency or high-frequency trading. Part of it was about a data centre in New Jersey which is just across the street, across the river, from the Nasdaq. This particular data centre is so close to, is in such geographic proximity to the trading floor, and the firm has started doing something quite interesting, I think, which has to do with their proximity to the traders on the floor. This closeness gives them an advantage over any other trades that are taking place elsewhere. All of this occurs in machinic time, this imperceptible machinic time. You know, there's this whole mode of wealth creation and capital speculation that's built on the basis of the time lag between traders on the floor and other data warehouses. I haven't really thought about this in a while but I think my suspicion is, and that was also prominent in *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine*, that the economist Böhm-Bawerk is a key figure here for an understanding of how this works. The time lag is the essential capitalist machinery in Böhm-Bawerk analysis of capitalism, his critique of Marxism is based on this. It was something Marx didn't understand sufficiently.

MB A common anti-capitalist thought would be that you have to destroy the monetary system but the implication in *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* is more that the monetary system isn't that important. The important thing about capitalism is the production of time. So the anti-capitalist, anti-monetary criticism of capitalism is based on an insufficient description of capitalism. People who want to fundamentally criticize capitalism have to address the production of time itself.

AG I definitely do not have a program for changing anything. I think that capitalism is so powerful because it operates on the level of this transcendental production of time. I would say techno-capitalism. I would like to make sure you have emphasized the technological aspect of it. That's the machinery that is the most core, this techno-capitalist production of time.

MB I'm only asking because the usual anti-monetary criticism of capitalism, from this perspective, misunderstands what capitalism is about.

AG Because it doesn't go deep enough. But I think there are a bunch of ideas colliding here. I'm not sure if you start with this idea that there is this techno-capitalist production of time and the fundamental aspect

of that is this timeline of a linear progression. Then how does that relate to the notion of the spiral, and my interest in the informal? Insofar as I have any kind of politics, which I feel like I don't even want to have, it would be on that side of things and have more to do with these kinds of disruptions or openings. In the time lag, where is the opening for zones of experimentation? When you have the production of time lags, how does that get captured by certain things and how does that allow for zones of experimentation? A question like 'how do you overthrow capitalism' is just not my kind of question.

MB I know.

AG In my current project I'm also interested in timelines. I'm interested in thinking about electromagnetic waves. The wave project is coming out of that. But it also has to do with timelines. It has to do with communication lines, communication occurring through these technosystems such as wireless technology. I think it's interesting to think about because the Böhm-Bawerk thing is to say: You have a house and you want some water. What the capitalist figures out is that it works to your advantage to take some time to build a pipe to your house to make the water run rather than just going every day to fetch the water. And that time lag is the investment, the time used for making the pipe for getting the water is where the capitalist machinery is. How does that relate to finance capitalism and the contemporary technology that's about trying to minimize that lag, to almost make that lag disappear? Obviously, that's far beyond human cognitive capacity.

MB But the outcome of that kind of investment has increased.

AG Totally. But the time lag itself has been reduced. We can't even perceive it anymore. Everything is bound up with it, everything from the entire capitalist financial system to Einsteinian physics is bound up with that time lag.

MB There is a lot of religious history in both *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine* and *Shanghai Future*, in particular on apocalyptic thinking in religion. But in regard to Chinese history, there is also your note that Mao Zedong was influenced by the tradition of 'sudden awakening' in Chan philosophy when he rejected the Marxist theory of gradual progress, of the stages of dialectical history. I haven't really thought about Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution in that way. It's a quite interesting perspective, how much religion and religious history is sort of interlocked with political decisions, because you spent much more time on the history of calendars and explaining the effect of calendrical thinking on politics.

AG And calendars are obviously religious, too. I think it is difficult,

this question about whether you call something religion or politics, in particular in this part of the world. There's supposed to have been some sort of historical moment when that break was clearly felt. I guess that is bound to the origin of philosophy. But the idea of some sort of difference doesn't really exist here. The term religion doesn't even really exist, or philosophy. Those are some of the modern concepts that are brought in. So I would certainly say that Mao could be read as being someone that was engaged in the religious tradition.

THE CITY AS ENTITY

MB I only arrived in Shanghai yesterday. So I haven't had time to discover Shanghai on my own terms and bring my own thoughts on the city into the conversation. I've also kind of avoided it till now, but if I'm to say a few things about my approach to your work, both Anna's work on time spirals and Nick's work in general, I might as well do it now.

First of all, I'm interested in the legacy of Ccru and in turning what could be called the Landian orientation towards the future upside-down and using the conceptual machinery from Ccru and your writings on the prehistoric past. In some sense this was already done in Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*, which is of course very impressive on its own, but from an archaeological perspective I think there are certain minor flaws in it, especially when the concept of hidden writing is applied to archaeology. I think it's better to think about archaeological objects as figural forces.

Nick Land Is this a sort of Foucauldian move you're making?

MB Mostly as a critique of Foucault's debasement of the term archaeology and the work of archaeologists. No, it's much closer to Lyotard's work on the figural. The way I see it is that archaeology is always a destruction of any attempt to make a reading, and it's that destruction you have to understand.

NL And you're connecting that to xenopoetics?

MB Well, for instance Amy's 3D poems are obviously no longer primarily interested in poetry as text. It's poetry as a material form exhibiting a force on its own, a force of resistance to the primacy of scriptural logic. My challenge to her is to say that literature, at least modern literature in its most advanced form, has its roots in a time before the invention of writing, that modern literature is actually an archaeological object from a time that has only recently disclosed itself. In prehistorical archaeology you find a lot of visual or figurative objects that it seems wrong to interpret as signs or even symbols or related terms. Rather they are material objects in which the forcefulness of the figural is brought to reflect on itself. And as modern poetry tends towards the speechless, towards the obliteration of its status as writing or a movement beyond the limits of writing, I think there's a case to be made that literature is just a variation of, or deviation from, the pre-historic manipulation of figural forces. To some extent xenopoetics, as a culmination of that tendency, proves my point.

NL Do you think she agrees with that?

MB Well, we'll have to see. Secondly, regarding your writings, I think it would be interesting to start from your travel writings, just bear in mind that by travel writings I mean most of your writings from China. One reason to start with these writings is that a general motive, or motivation, in your writings seems to have been the ultimate modern attitude: voyages into the unknown to find the new. Obviously, your work can be divided into different phases, each with its own fields of interest, lately politics and finance, crypto-currency. Still, every phase unfolds as a voyage into unknown territory. Another reason is that it seems to have been a general method for you to write from under the skin of whatever has caught your attention and interest. There was a time when you wrote from under the skin of Bataille and Kant, sort of like a parasite feeding off their flesh. And a time when you wrote from inside silicon chips and the codes of computer viruses. I think one could argue, too, that the NRx writings to some extent are written from under the skin of Mencius Moldbug. Rather than being written from the bemused point of view of a foreigner in foreign lands, the travel writings, even all the texts that aren't literally about travelling, are sort of written from under the skin of China, or from under the skin of Shanghai as some kind of sentient being on its own. What this means is that the chosen skin in a particular period or in a particular phase of your writing is also what accounts for the differences in style, vocabulary and references. But there still seems to be a consistent thought behind it all. In the Bataille book you already write about capitalism as a tendency rather than a total system. And you write on the failure of left-wing thinking to offer a consistent critique and viable alternative on that ground: at its most basic level left-wing thinking doesn't understand capitalism, and because it doesn't understand that capitalism has no substantial socio-cultural

consistency there's an illusionary aspect to left-wing critique.

NL It all seems plausible. I obviously haven't thought about it in these terms but there's nothing that you're saying that sounds off beat.

MB The third point would be that if it's all about voyages into the unknown, to be very reductive, then travel writing is the contested model for all of your writings. When one looks at the actual travel writings, one would expect a lot of challenges for your own writing because travel writing is often based on subjective experience and biography.

AG I was just thinking as you were talking about *Erewhon*, the Samuel Butler book, as a kind of travel writing. I don't know if it's productive as a piece of travel writing but that's what it is. So there's a relationship there, perhaps, in that tradition.

NL I can't remember what we did in terms of labels but at some point there was definitely the idea of a time traveller's guide to Shanghai. I don't know whether we used that as a subtitle. It's interesting because obviously it's all very constrained institutionally. I mean I was just working for a magazine company. They wanted to do a guidebook. I thought this seemed like an interesting project. But it's all within that framework of delivering something within a kind of awkward institutional context ... It's not that I'm disagreeing with anything that you're saying. But it's not really orchestrated at the level of subjective motivation except very partially. It's more that you're being projected into a certain path by these very processes. It all seemed just very quotidian.

AG At some level, Shanghai, as some big cities do, just captured both of our attention for quite a while. For a while it was like that was all there was to think about and explore, because the city itself is so engaging.

NL In Mikkel's terms, or alongside those terms, there is this question: What are you exploring when you're exploring the city? I think there was an attempt to displace that question a little bit. You're exploring time, you're exploring the nature of some kind of emergent individuated process, you're exploring this kind of abstract identity. The actual way you're heading on this path is not necessarily where you would expect to be going.

AG I imagine this is connected to this archaeology question about the city as an entity.

MB Yes, what you would want to do in archaeology is to understand past societies, sometimes constricted to a single village and at other times covering a large geographical area, as past intelligent machinery or emerging forms of past intelligence, rather than the more myopic focus

on the life of the individual person of the past or artefacts that come to symbolize a specific archaeological period.

NL I would say that our project is massively about the individual, but it is the individual as the city.

MB As I said, I expected travel writing to pose a challenge to you in terms of previous attempts to move beyond the subjective. However, when I read the Urbanatomy guidebook to Shanghai, I could see that the solution here was the same as it has always been: to engage a collective of different writers. Rather than a book written from a personal, individual perspective, it's the work of a community where the individual traits of different writers tend to fade away as a collective intelligence emerges.

NL Obviously I would say that any success on it is obviously very partial and broken in most respects. But the attempt was definitely to let the city speak, to define Shanghai in that way by trying to get its – I don't really like to say 'its voice', so I'm struggling to find the best way to say it – but to communicate it and to put the reader in communication with the city.

MB I initially had the impression that there had been a curious omission of the past in your writings. But the importance of the past has actually been stressed for the last ten years or so. Even though there's still an orientation towards the future, there's the time spiral which sort of harvests from the past and there is also a direct use of archaeology in some of the actual travel writings, and in general there are other examples where the historical past is the basis for an orientation towards the future in a way it wasn't in your earlier work. I came to think of the time spiral as a culmination of different kinds of time models, both in your own work and the Ccru work.

NL To answer this question about the specific modes of organization in Chinese cities and its difference to other big cities around the world, let's just take Shenzhen and Shanghai. We couldn't have done anything like this, either what we did in the guidebook or either of our subsequent writings on Shanghai, on another journey. There's nothing really clearly provoking that same tempo and making us write in a very different way. Because of the fact that high modernism, which is its tradition, is already weirdly in communication with the Shanghai of today, it pulls you into that dynamic really strongly.

AG The whole time spiral idea and this thing about allowing the city to voice itself, as soon you start engaging with the city you can't get away from that. It just performs that over and over again.

NL Its hypermodernism and its nostalgia are completely the same.

MB So the time spiral couldn't have been developed anywhere else?

NL It's complicated, because obviously there was a spiral thing in the Ccru, too. I think Shanghai reprocessed it and concretized it and took it to where it has subsequently gone.

AG I think there was an abstract interest in the spiral, which is kind of obvious, and then you see a place just manifesting it, trying to manifest it, so concretely.

NL We arrived early in the new millennium, so the opening of the city had already been going on for just under a decade. So it wasn't that we got there right at the start. But what was absolutely vividly striking was that the hypermodernist dynamic and mentality was massively about going back. It was like it was returning to the city of the future. Everywhere in the sort of places that are celebrating the new city, like the Urban Development Museum, is just this incredible celebration of the high modernist epoch in Shanghai which was really just cut short by war and revolution and all of these things and put into the deep freeze. It is not that there was any sort of reflexive gap or mediation. It's just that it went straight for the process of just reopening, and this kind of progressive dynamic was immediately also this regressive, recollective reanimation of what was the past. There is, of course, an urban memory that goes back before the 1920s and 30s, but that period is somehow in some real sense the centre of gravity of the urban past. There's nothing like the same drive for people to push the past back beyond that, into the Opium Wars or some time before that. The city's past is just that crazed source of development where the city of Shanghai was locally famous as this sort of avatar of the future.

TIME-SENSITIVITY

MB Urban Future promoted the idea that postmodernism in philosophy and literature studies was actually just ideas from economics, especially the idea of a postponement of meaning, for instance ...

NL Obviously that's expressed massively reductively. If I were subject to a sufficiently intense attack I would probably have to manoeuvre a little bit. I'm afraid I can't really help to see this other than as it's looking from my bitcoin work at the moment. But I do think there's a very mainstream teleology that bitcoin is radically disrupting, and that teleology is to do with the complexities of structures of debt. It is very tied up with the whole Kantian revolution, macroeconomics, the new sense of government and the academic expert in the economy and the control of the money supply as being a political objective, and through control of the money supply, control of mass economic psychology. So that complex, which has just come to seem so normal to people that it just escapes question, I think is deeply isomorphic with what people call postmodernism. To say that postmodernism as a cultural commons introduces ideas from economics, I could see people quite reasonably arguing with that particular way of formulating it. But I would retreat no further than saying that it's a consistent socio-cultural complex that has to be seen in a kind of integrated fashion.

MB Then, to talk about someone who has been enormously present in your own work, how do you see Deleuze? Is he part of postmodernism or is he out of it and trying to face that economic complex as well?

NL Deleuze is a really cryptic figure. He's playing a lot of interesting strategic games. But I don't think he is really a postmodernist in this sense. He has a critique of the model of debt as the basic form of socio-economic articulation. He uses Nietzsche to do that. It's a very interesting tradition, the whole *Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche talks about creating an animal that's entitled to make promises. It's such a contemporary concern, and it's so important in Deleuze's reading of where we are and who we are and what happened in the second half of the 20th century. And I think the difference between for instance Derrida and Deleuze is absolutely huge in this respect. Derrida embraces the postmodern condition in a way that I don't think Deleuze is doing at all.

MB I don't know if you're familiar with the American poet Charles Olson. In the 1950s, some twenty years before Lyotard's work on the postmodern condition, Olson defined in some slightly different, rather crude terms what he saw as a development into postmodernism in literature and art. To him the difference between a modernist attitude and a postmodern attitude is that the modernist feels alienated from the past and therefore sets out to create from a clean slate, whereas there is no experience of alienation in the postmodern encounter with the past. Instead there's a whole plethora of other experiences, including an experience of debt to the past no matter the distance from it. Consequently, the postmodernist has to work from a much more complicated, mixed and confused state. Do you think that distinction would put neo-modernity and the time spiral on a slide backwards into, at least, Charles Olson's definition of postmodernity?

NL It's interesting. I wonder how you can square that definition with more recent articulations of postmodernity. I was working with some colleagues a long time ago, twenty years ago or even more, on a book that was to be called *Machinic Postmodernism*. I'm not dogmatic about maintaining postmodernism's critical practice, I think the tactics are relatively clear but its deepest strategic orientation of how it is operating is relatively counterproductive. It obviously connects with the question of time lag and simultaneity. Time lag is in a sense a very postmodern thing, the *différance* is almost a formulation of a time lag, isn't it? So if the annihilation of debt, which is a Deleuzian theme, a Nietzschean theme and a bitcoin theme, is your guide, then those things are radically distinct from the basic parts of postmodernism as a socio-economic or cultural phenomenon which is to do basically with the elaboration of credit structures. There is a sort of quite explicit attempt to say that derivatives trading is this kind of limit for philosophical possibility in a way that is very, I think, postmodern actually because this

elaboration of credit structures is really the postmodern attitude.

MB Do you want to talk more specifically about your bitcoin writing?

NL I think we should just see if it imposes itself. You know, the biographical illusion is that people have a relation to their work that is simultaneous. Like in the case of Reza. Reza could in various ways say things now that would be extremely interesting in relation to *The Cyclonopedia*, but what he could not do is speak now in some simple way as the author. And that's a general phenomenon.

MB This thing about the biographical illusion is intriguing if you think about modernity in terms of narratives. The narrative of modernity is quite linear, but the narrative of modernist literature usually isn't. There's a productive conflict or tension there. I wonder what is the proper narrative structure of neomodernity or the time spiral? In the Chinese state identity there must be some explicit narrative connected with the modernization ...

NL I think that question is fantastically interesting but it's also very multiple, there's a lot of different sub-questions in it. One of them is what's the relationship between the Chinese state narrative and the actual prevailing social, cultural narratives in China. I think the relation is complicated.

There's a long tradition in China of deferring to the central imperial narrative but in a way that leaves a lot of space, and the implicit social deal is all based on that space. There's the very famous saying: The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away. Wherever you go here it's generally shocking for Westerners how non-antagonistic the overwhelming mass of China's population is. But within that non-antagonism is also tacitly the point where what you're deferring to, what you're respecting is very strictly delimited. It has its function. Social stability and all of these things require this kind of attitude of non-rebellion. But the mountains are high, and the emperor is far away.

Then there is this whole other, perhaps warmer and certainly more important sphere and certainty that is enabled by the fact that the differences are very ritualistic and formulaic and constrained in its depth. I think it's very confusing for Westerners. The Western side of it is of course also very interesting and complicated. Because there's an ideal of tight unity of public pronouncement and private interest. It's very natural in Western people to still want to say that insofar there is a kind of capitalist dynamic in the West, it should be strongly reflected in some kind of public and capitalist pronouncement. Western people love these notions like neoliberalism which is the tight identity between what is being politically stated and the actual social process in motion. I think there's a really big break from that here. It's reflected in this confusion about China, is it socialist, is it capitalist? You can't solve that riddle in

these idealized Western terms of there being some unity of public statement and social process.

It's not as if it's purely hypocritical but I do think that all the government's pronouncements have this ritualistic aspect. They expect to be respected on a certain level, but they don't expect it to saturate work and social production. They will say something knowing full well that it will be socially referenced only as this kind of liturgy.

This whole thing is getting back to the question about the government's statement. The government has a rhetoric about the future to a degree that is mostly taken from and slightly updated and schematized from Marx. I think almost everyone will accept it as just the liturgical content of this dynasty. The CCP, the new China dynasty, has a certain set of ritualistic commitments, and everyone will nod to those commitments, because they don't want to overthrow the dynasty. But I don't think that in doing so they are saying in any profound way that this is the narrative that is actually guiding us. It's rather that the path we're following requires a relationship to this narrative, but it's not captured by that.

MB What kind of narrative would be reflective of the times or the state of the world?

NL I definitely think that time anomaly in some form is intrinsic to the neomodern attitude. My immediate response to your question is to go back to what we've been talking about in terms of Shanghai which is very singular, and the movie *Looper* which I sort of did my own book *Shanghai Times* around. It's very helpful. Again, it's complicated, because it's all tied up with the concrete process of the relationship of Hollywood to China, too. The movie includes all these Chinese elements, it wants to have a Chinese audience. But I think it does that by searching for a plane that does really work. The weird time scramble you get in that way where the luminous skyline is a picture of the future is actually very in tune with the sort of narrative structures that work here.

MB Because a narrative structure is always a kind of a direction to follow.

NL The fact that a certain dynamic of regression is intrinsic to the most intense kind of futuralization is, I think, the neomodern insight which is captured with extraordinary intensity here. Because there's a sense that the Shanghai of high modernism was already inhabiting our present. That's why we reciprocally tilt into futuralization now and in doing so dramatically find ourselves back on a plane that we share with the past. In terms of your interest in not a reading of the past but a communication with the past, that's the concrete form that it takes. It's not that the past becomes intelligible, but it becomes your flat plane of communication with the past at the exact point when you seem to be tilting away from it. I mean, what was Art Deco about? I don't think you

can answer that historiographically, you answer that by the fact that at a certain forward-tilted plane where you are now you find yourself at a plane where Art Deco is talking to you.

MB I would like to return to the biographical illusion and the question of narrative. You have a very stated dislike of biography when it comes to philosophy, and I think that many of the projects you've been involved with have been about escaping biography and the focus on one individual person, probably because that focus has a very rigid narrative written into it. But perhaps there is a possibility of letting life story and narrative meet in alternative ways and develop into another kind of biography?

NL I can see that, but I think it would always actually explode the biography. I just have this absolutely solid commitment to the fact that the biographical narrative is illusionary. It just seems clear to me that that's the case. The real agent never finds its own explanandum of anything that happens in the self-reflexive individual. The self-reflexive individual is the puppet of various things. It's a good narrative device for exploring certain things. But the point that you actually have some genuinely revelatory moment is always against or beyond or outside.

MB I was actually thinking about the intertwining of biography and mythology. Biography often turns into mythology in its narrative mode. Still, I think a very accurate autobiography based on the lacunae in mythological narrative could be useful as an attempt at demythologization, though it would probably end up being very dull reading. The projects you've been involved with obviously attempted something different. I thought about them as attempts to move away from the intertwining of biography and mythology – or mythomania – qua the evasion of biography. And still there is this tendency, in other people's texts, to mythologize the years at Warwick university and the Ccru. I don't know if it's interesting or fascinating in itself, but there's definitely some tension worth exploring in the tendency to turn all the escape attempts into myths.

NL It's not going to go away, those myths aren't going to expire. People love those stories. They confirm things they would like to think about themselves and their own agency and their own control over fate. And then there's a whole wider series of social commitments and they conform well to that. It would be unrealistic to think that they could simply be expelled.

MB One thing about the Ccru I find fascinating from a historical point of view is that the traditional cultural narrative about influence and importance is focused on individual persons breaking into the current state of the world at specific points in time. Sartre, for instance,

and later Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard can all be said to mark both a break in time and a breakthrough for a new direction of thinking at a specific point in time, in general occasioned by a major publication. Bataille, Blanchot and a few other people from a slightly older generation of writers, on the other hand, are more like hidden geographical features that direct the flow of time and thought and continue to influence several later generations. They were present as forces of influence and contestation for most of the second half of the 20th century, to some extent even before World War II, from the weakening of surrealism in the 1930s and Sartre's first success to way beyond the heyday of poststructuralism, but mostly as hidden forces, mostly in obscurity. I suspect something similar is the case with the Ccru: the Chapman brothers, Kode9 and Hyperdub, Mark Fisher and a few others all seem to have made their mark as parts of a specific era of British culture in another way than Ccru. They've all acknowledged the importance of the Ccru, but the Ccru itself is still more like the hidden forces or geographical features that though unseen direct the flow of time.

NL I think it's interesting to what degree those perceptions are themselves time-sensitive. One of the really interesting things about talking to Amy is that I can see the coalescence of social phenomena that are very analogous. There are collective projects taking place that are very intense in the way that they're fused onto the sort of technological and media possibilities of the time, very intensively, and they are obviously in their own sort of space of reflection and utterly disruptive of this notion of the biographical importance to the point that it would become comical in those spaces to think that you can cast off those micro-social processes into the actions of discrete, isolated or individual agents. They are still in obscurity. We've been across this horrid desert of the Facebook era in which everything has relapsed badly into this kind of blazonry of what's happening. As a new generation disrupts that, maybe those stories will just become less and less. In a similar way you could say that looking back at this whole strange Acéphale social process around Bataille, the ability to grasp that in terms that isn't again just hard illusions is probably also dependent on the intensity of the social processes that are taking place in your own time. This thing with the Ccru, I don't think anyone involved in it knows what it was, but given some of the things that came out of it, it just seems to me like it has a certain kind of timelessness. I say that in particular because of the numogram. I think the numogram is something that passed through us and is a vast structure of time that dwarfs the sort of perceptions that might be taking place.

MB Would you care to define the numogram?

NL Well, I think it defines itself. Any description is a potential degeneration. To define it in words in a way that doesn't degenerate it is a

huge challenge. I think there are sentences that it can spawn around it which are not defilements. That's possible. But the possibility of saying that in its diagrammatic form it requires some level of commentary, or even that the level of commentary could somehow be superior, is just simply wrong.

MB I guess one of the big ideas of the Ccru was that thinking is not commentary, it is to use all aspects of thought and culture, to attend to them and engage with them and in the process change not only yourself but also the nature of thought.

NL Yes, I mean, in the final five years before the whole Ccru just imploded, there was a very explicit sense that what we were doing was working the numogram, and with working I mean working in the sense that it is used in magical traditions. We were trying to find ways of just letting it be a guidance system.

DIFFERENT MASKS OF HUMANITY

MB Did you see *Blade Runner 2049*?

NL Yes.

MB Okay, I will just quickly say that I was hugely disappointed by it. In terms of its narrative, it was very regular, it seemingly abstained from exposition, yet the characters still in no uncertain terms explicitly interpreted and explained events and psychological motives to each other, and most importantly the film had none of the moral ambiguity of the original *Blade Runner*. Having said that, I would like to link my impression of the future in the original *Blade Runner* with an engagement with the past.

To me *Blade Runner* is about autism, for instance, or Asperger's, something like that, people with a completely different experience of the world. Its question is: How do we find the courage not just to listen to someone whose opinions are different from our own, but to live with someone who has a completely different way of experiencing the world, experiencing society, experiencing social life, what place will we allow for such experiences inside organized society?

Regarding the past, one of the things that got me interested in how you actually relate to the past was something you wrote about the Terracotta Army. It was basically just a few private photographs from your visit to the site and a note stating that it was hard to not be impressed, even for someone like you. So what kind of impression did the site more specifically make, or rather why did such an, I would say, encounter with past intelligence make an impression, and what, in your

opinion, would then be the difference between how past intelligence disrupts our self-image, our conception of our self, and how a future artificial intelligence promises to challenge our understanding of ourselves? As you've said, the threat of AI is not killer robots, but the collapse of our conception of human uniqueness.

NL Let's just start with the new *Blade Runner* movie. I've dealt with that word, disappointment. But then I feel I'm not there yet. You want to somehow move beyond that. It had elements of greatness about it that added to the distress. The narrative was just terrible. But what I said to Amy about this was that it was almost like a mirror image in relation to the original *Blade Runner*, which starts off with assuming that there're some common presumptions about humanity and takes you on a path towards subverting them. And the final question that defines the movie is the question: How do you know who you are, how confident are you that you're actually human? Whereas in *Blade Runner 2049* the most impressive part about it is that it begins with the absolute terminus, a complete loss of assumed humanity. You have a replicant and his digital avatar girlfriend. Nowhere in this whole structure is there any reference to some common humanity. It's not humanity engaging with something alien. It's the alien engaging with the alien in different masks of humanity, self-consciously fake. That starting point has a comparable intensity to the destination of the previous movie, but the direction of the movie is away from that, back again to this very Christian humanistic myth about the miracle of the child. It is returning you to a restoration of some sacralized humanity. It's almost an epic disappointment in the sense that the movie is able to reflect the previous movie. It's not just a hideous abortion that fails to get even close to the previous one. It's got a structural integrity with it, but it uses that to completely reverse the path of the previous movie. I'm sure that's got to be historically interesting. Now how does this connect with these other parts of your question?

MB Now that we have this kind of regression into the Christian myth, what does it tell us about ...

NL Where we are? I don't know. But I'm sure it tells us something, because I see this so commonly. On the left this increasingly explicit reanimation of Christianity is very strong. You see it in Badiou, you see it in Žižek, even Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies* ends up basically revalorizing a certain set of Christian values to set against what she sees as a deterioration into a sort of nihilistic, Nietzschean cultural attitude. Then on the right, I would particularly single out Peter Thiel's use of René Girard. I think Girard is really key in this respect. Not only is he very interesting, his work is one of the most ingenious lines for this Christian cultural restoration. But then Peter Thiel converts it into economics. His book *Zero to One* is a kind of paean to Girard and converts him into the language of economic competition and business strategy

and all of these great colloquial capitalist registers. He does it with an incredible competence. So there's a full spectrum. The process of Christian reanimation happening, I think, has a lot to do with the fact that the world is becoming multipolar. People are seeing that as a specific Western and cultural legacy rather than, as it had to become, becoming increasingly transparent and invisible, as some kind of accepted global culture, thinned out and decomposed and concretized enough to pretend to be a new world order of uncontroversial human rights and globalized faculties. That project has collapsed, that project of a sublimated global anaemic Christianity has died. And because it has died, I think there's this restoration of a much more uncamouflaged culturally assertive Christianity. It's coming from all different parts of the political spectrum.

MB Then the part about having the courage to live with people with fundamentally different modes of experience and the encounter with past intelligence. What was so intriguing about the Terracotta Army?

NL You see, that emperor, Qin Shi Huang, who as you know was the first emperor of China, is particularly notorious. Have you seen Zhang Yimou's movie *Hero*? It's the morale of totalitarian rule. It's called Asiatic despotism for a reason, no historical Western society comes close to that, executing all the scholars, burning all the books, and unifying the country through this process of absolutely brutal statecraft. In *Hero* you can see this weird ambivalence to that. There's no leader, people know he's a monster, and he's also the template for Mao Zedong. So you can't talk about him without it being also a kind of subterranean discussion of Mao Zedong. It would be neat if you could simply define it, the sheer – I don't know what of it, because I don't think 'impressiveness' translates into anything explanatory. In a way this connects to your question about how these aliens live among us, about autism. It echoes something Anna wants us to work on together, which is to do with sinophobia and technophobia. If you look at the canon of sinophobic tropes, they're very comparable to technophobic or robophobic tropes. One of the themes that come up is people who have a lack of ethical comprehension, who are somehow different to us. We presumably don't share the same values in some subtle way. It's not just some model of modern savagery, it's just this model of difference. The Chinese work too hard, they're copying stuff, they don't complain ... It's basically an anticipatory structure of the fear of an automatized robotic future. It's a competition, and this form of intense competition is intolerable. Somehow it's being said that the Chinese are not human in the way that we're used to. They will live under conditions that we will never dream of. They will work harder than we will ever dream of working. We're being subject to a form of economic competition that is not acceptable because it is not recognizable. I think this whole complex of racism and fear of the future is really interesting. Now in the contemporary world those

things have massively come together. I think that's why there is this sino-future fear. Because obviously the technological industries and this set of Chinese cultural traits have been machinically fused. The techno-industry at its heart now has this Chinese element. That's just to say that I think what you're saying about *Blade Runner*, what the movie is about, is also very closely related to this. The West is going to endure a lot of psychological stress, and this kind of stuff is going to be a big part of it.

MB Returning to the example of the Terracotta Army, perhaps the difference between how the idea of a future AI is unsettling our self-image, and how the past can unsettle it in a comparable but still distinctive way, is that in the encounter with a past intelligence there will always be the human framework. The past can disclose the radically human, it can display how radically different and diverse human experience and intelligence can be, to the point of being unrecognizable. Whereas the radicality of the future AI ...

NL Is completely unrelated, yes. That's why it's really good, this circuit we're on here and this whole thing to do with Qin Shi Huang and the android. Because part of it is this sense of being utterly alien. It's simply unimaginable, it's beyond the notion of human possibility that this kind of regime could exist. There has to be a certain intensity of sinophobic racism that actually takes you into the same zone that you get to on this other futuristic path to do with automation, where there is a complete collapse of a sense of common human identity and an encounter – whether psychotic or realistic doesn't matter – with this sense of this other utterly unfamiliar culture that just breaks your conception of human community.

MB Some people will say that the path towards automation also has devastating effects on the actual living human population and critically point out three, as they see them, defects of both left and right accelerationism: the failure to question the limits of capitalistic production, the failure to recognize that an intentional creation or construction of economic crisis is an inherent part of the capitalist machinery, and the failure to question the contrast between the promise of technological emancipation and the lived reality of people subjected to accelerated technological developments.

NL We can obviously take that step by step. I think it's difficult, I can see why it's tempting, but I think the structures of left and right acceleration are so different that it's very difficult to find a common critical platform that will cut through them both.

MB What do you make of the claim that you wilfully ignore the difference between historical and contemporary consequences, and the

sheer potential of technological emancipation?

NL It's difficult. Already in Deleuze and the Ccru, the thing we were definitely holding on to was the reality of the virtual. So a distinction between potentials and actuality seems very philosophically problematic. The tendency of capitalism is to intensify virtualities by introducing these marketable virtual economic objects that are amphibious between potential and actuality. When you buy a piece of a company, what are you buying? A piece of actuality or a piece of virtuality? Neither straightforwardly. It's only if you're literally just going to liquidate the thing and sell it that the next day you're dealing purely with actuality. Whereas the virtuality that you're buying into is anchored in the fact that it has to actually be a realistically plausible corporate process of development. While I don't want to refuse what's going on behind that question, I don't think it's a well-formulated objection as it stands.

And this point about crisis production isn't really interesting to us. Crisis has become a bit soft since the 1930s which was a sort of hard crisis. I think capitalism is fine with crisis and maybe even addicted to crisis. It's when society's too comfortable that it really deteriorates badly. The Chinese example and the police state example in general, as in East Germany, are the same. You go through a social process that actually exposes the outer limits of collectivization. You literally murder the bourgeoisie. You couldn't have a more extreme crisis of capitalism. And what comes out of it is a form of enhanced turbo capitalism that has never been seen before on Earth. The Chinese growth rate since the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping has been beyond anything anyone has ever seen.

The notion of a crisis of capitalism is again complex. To say that a crisis of capitalism is somehow getting closer to killing capitalism seems to be a lead without any historical evidence. The more extreme the process of social insurgence against capitalism, the more radical the capitalism you end up with in the wake of that. Vietnam is another recent example. When people are polled on these questions that are meant to just engage popular libidinal investments, you know, do you think that market economy is the best way to organize society, Vietnam has the most positive response to that in the world. It just leaves all Western anxieties in the dust.

MB Anna and I were talking about the production of time as the most important aspect of capitalism, far more important than the monetary system, and how criticism of the evils of the monetary system is mis-directed, that yours and Anna's work goes for a deeper understanding of capitalism ...

NL It would be complacent from my side of things to claim I have a better understanding of capitalism than left-wing critics. But I do think there's a really crucial relationship between capitalism as a social pro-

cess and the formal philosophical structures of the Kantian critical philosophy. Both of them betray anyone who wants to set a limit. The quintessence of what the transcendental philosophy says is that time is not an object. So every objectification of time is going to be subverted, it's going to have missed its actual target and therefore in some way fail. It will be metaphysically flawed. That's what happens with the critique of capitalism. It is always tempted to engage in premature objectification and say this is what capitalism is, we can tell, we can define it as an object and then by doing it we can set limits to it. That objectification process always has the same metaphysical congenital defect. You can argue with it, which obviously I do, but that's less interesting than the fact that as time passes it will be exposed for its inadequacies. The left that bases itself on this model of objectification of capitalism will be defeated and outwitted and mocked by the actual historical process. That's obviously what the history of the left is, the successive attempts to upgrade the objectification of capital and then a bit later reevaluate it because capitalism over-spilt in all directions and developed in directions the left didn't foresee. There is symmetry there, because I think it's a mistake on the right, too, to have a model of capitalism. You should see that as a joke. Capitalism is a transcendental process.

MB If I remember your video lecture on the blockchain and time correctly, and understood it correctly, the basic claim of the lecture was that Kant's model of time was proven right by the blockchain, while Einstein's model of time was proven wrong. According to Einstein's model you cannot synchronize different points in space, but according to you the blockchain effectively does exactly that, it synchronizes different points in space.

NL Again, you have to be careful. It would be ridiculous to just say that Einsteinian physics has been disproved. But the point is that the blockchain is designed to solve the double spending problem, where I've got a unit of cryptocurrency and I give it to you and I also give it to someone else, and therefore both of you are cheated and it's not working as money. That's the model of the problem the blockchain is designed to solve. That problem is isomorphic with general relativity, which is to say for one person this happens before that, and for another person this happens after that. It's exactly the same. The non-simultaneity or the lack of absolute succession in Einsteinian space-time is having an insoluble double-spending problem. So if that were the case, if that's where we were, then bitcoin would not be bitcoin, it would not be a cryptocurrency. So it does in a certain sense solve the problem of general relativity.

There's a very interesting exchange in the development stage between Jim Donald and Satoshi Nakamoto about precisely this problem. They call it the Byzantine Generals Problem. It's a game theoretical model that the blockchain is trying to solve. The scenario is that you got a whole bunch of generals waiting to attack a city. They are trying

to communicate with themselves to coordinate their attack, but there are some communications between them that are corrupted, and they don't know which ones. In attempting to communicate with each other they could receive false, deliberately misleading information in order to sabotage their plan. That scenario is a way of describing this problem with synchronization. The Einsteinian space-time model says that you can't solve the Byzantine Generals Problem. It's a mistake. But the bitcoin idea is if you have this proof of work system which is based on quantizing time by a large scale, like a 10-minute block, and across that unit of time, if that's an indivisible unit of time, a block which has no internal generation, then you can synchronize within a block, you can synchronize across the block, and you sort of solve the space-time problem. Now in a way you just got around it. If you were trying to have an interplanetary blockchain you would need to keep expanding your block process and its duration. An interstellar blockchain would be ridiculous. You would need like an 8-year block size. It couldn't conceivably happen.

So it's not that it's disputing Einsteinian physics. But it's finding a technological fix for the problem of general relativity and it does so, to go back to your earlier thing about the production of time, by creating synthetic time. This is the first real vivid example of what it is for capitalism to produce artificial time.

MB I can't help but think of the blockchain, of the formal structure of the blockchain, as a great anti-poem, a counter-example to the tradition of verse in poetry. There's a tendency to understand poetry as related to time, because the verse or line breaks critically change the meaning of certain words when you move from one line to the next. The sense of poetry is supposed to be this change of meaning, the fluctuation of meaning in time. So if there's a specific production of a flexible or fluctuating artificial time in poetry, it's completely different from the production of time in the blockchain. Just an observation. I guess all this stuff about the blockchain is related to your book on bitcoin which has been underway for quite some time. It seems to be a massive project and one of great importance to you.

NL Well, it's in a state now where it's very close to being finished, but I don't know how easy it is to summarize. I mean, the conversation we just had is one aspect which I think is quite essential to it. It's basically an attempt to produce a translation protocol between the critical philosophy and the bitcoin protocol. I think in doing that the sense of what both of them are is modified. You can see it as a book about Kantianism as much as a book about the blockchain and how capitalism and modernity are almost equal or interchangeable terms. It's hard to have a panoramic focus on it now while I'm working on it.

MB You wrote a very short sort of endorsement in reverse of David

Columbia's book *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism*, more or less in the line of saying that it was very good as a diagnosis, but wrong in every aspect of its negative evaluations. The points criticized ought rather to be seen as positive.

NL I think the subtitle is beautiful, I love that.

MB I thought your own book on bitcoin would be more political, dealing with bitcoin in terms of social change and political change.

NL I tried to be just cold and not say this is good and this is bad. As far as I'm interested in what's happening, what can or could not realistically be stopped, why do certain people want certain things to happen or not, I tried to be on that level as disengaged as possible. I guess I'm more critical of the left than the right. Maybe I don't talk about the right as much unless the bitcoin people themselves are included on the right. But it seems to me that the theoretical assumptions that have been made on the left are just not very good. I mainly talk about David Graeber and his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. I found him useful because he distils certain notions about money as credit and sees it as the essence of the capitalist system. So bitcoin should be a problem for him, because there is no credit in the bitcoin system. There is a certain convergence between Graeber and the Austrian School of Economics in the sense that money as a positive aspect is associated with liberalism, but better or worse depending on which side you're coming from. I do think that Columbia's book is interesting. I like to see this sparkling conflict and cultural disintegration.

MB About the idea of coldness. In the 1990s there was the project of writing from an inhuman point of view. I think that it's very hard to reach a level where it is not conceived or experienced as human coldness, I mean in their anger and aggression many of the writings from the '90s still felt angry and aggressive in a recognizable human way.

NL I would definitely say that's a mark of failure.

MB One impression from my first week in China was the experience of disinterest in the same way that you can experience nature as disinterested. Natural life goes on without really being disturbed or even paying attention to you, unless you get very close to whatever bird or animal is within reach. I felt something similar here. I do not mean it in any dismissive way, and it is not to compare Chinese people to a natural force or something like that. It was more the impression of what you call the gravity well of Chinese tradition and culture and history and the sheer scope of the country. There's so much gravity in all of that, a single Westerner doesn't make any impression or arouse any particular interest. As a traveller it felt like a kind of freedom, a free space to travel

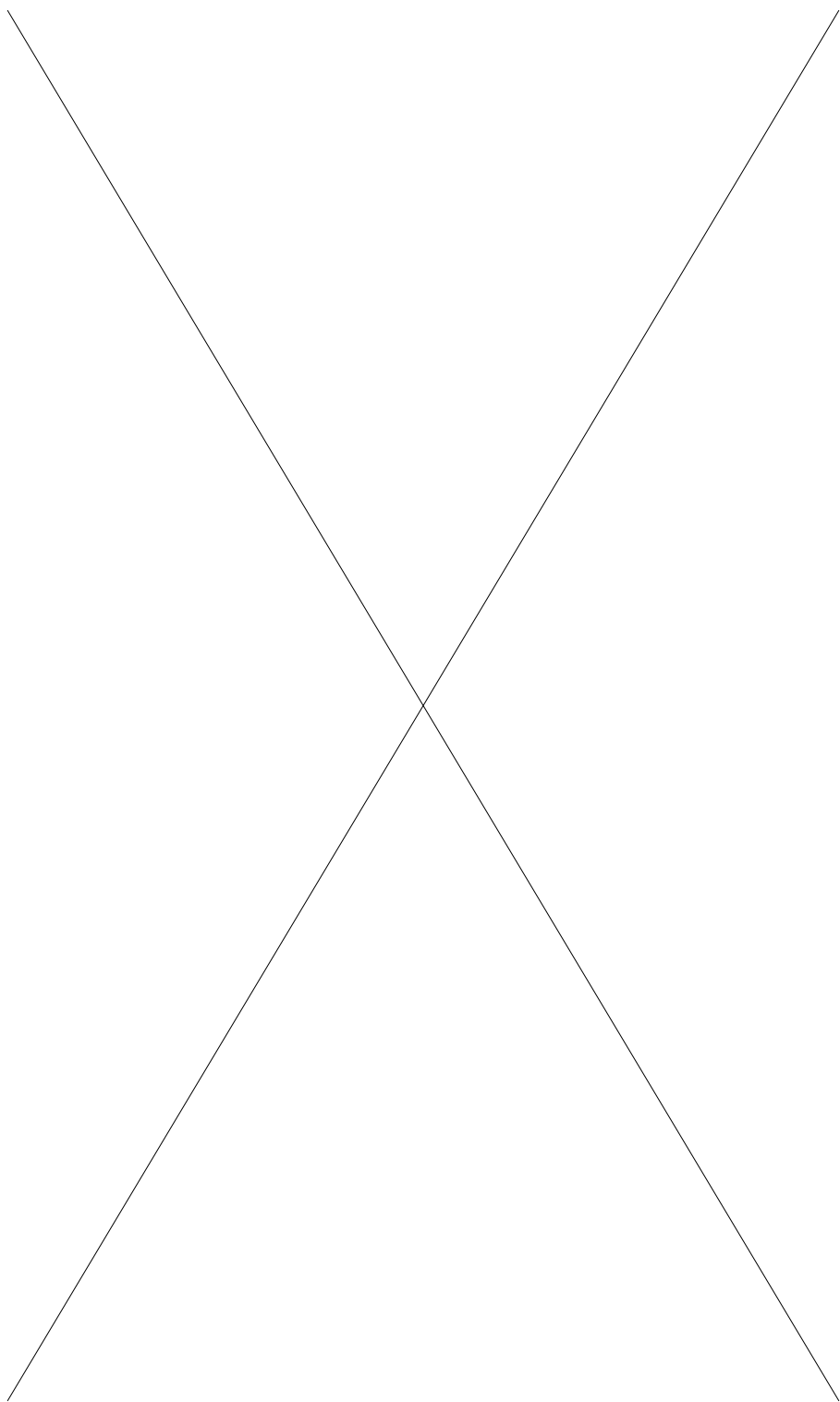
in, unburdened by the heavy gaze of other people. But, perhaps more interestingly, I also wondered if there is a connection here to your interest in a detached point of view, to be guided by coldness.

NL It sounds plausible. And I certainly like, as you said, the sort of anthropological distance. Some people are very hungry for community. That's not something that to me has been particularly attractive.

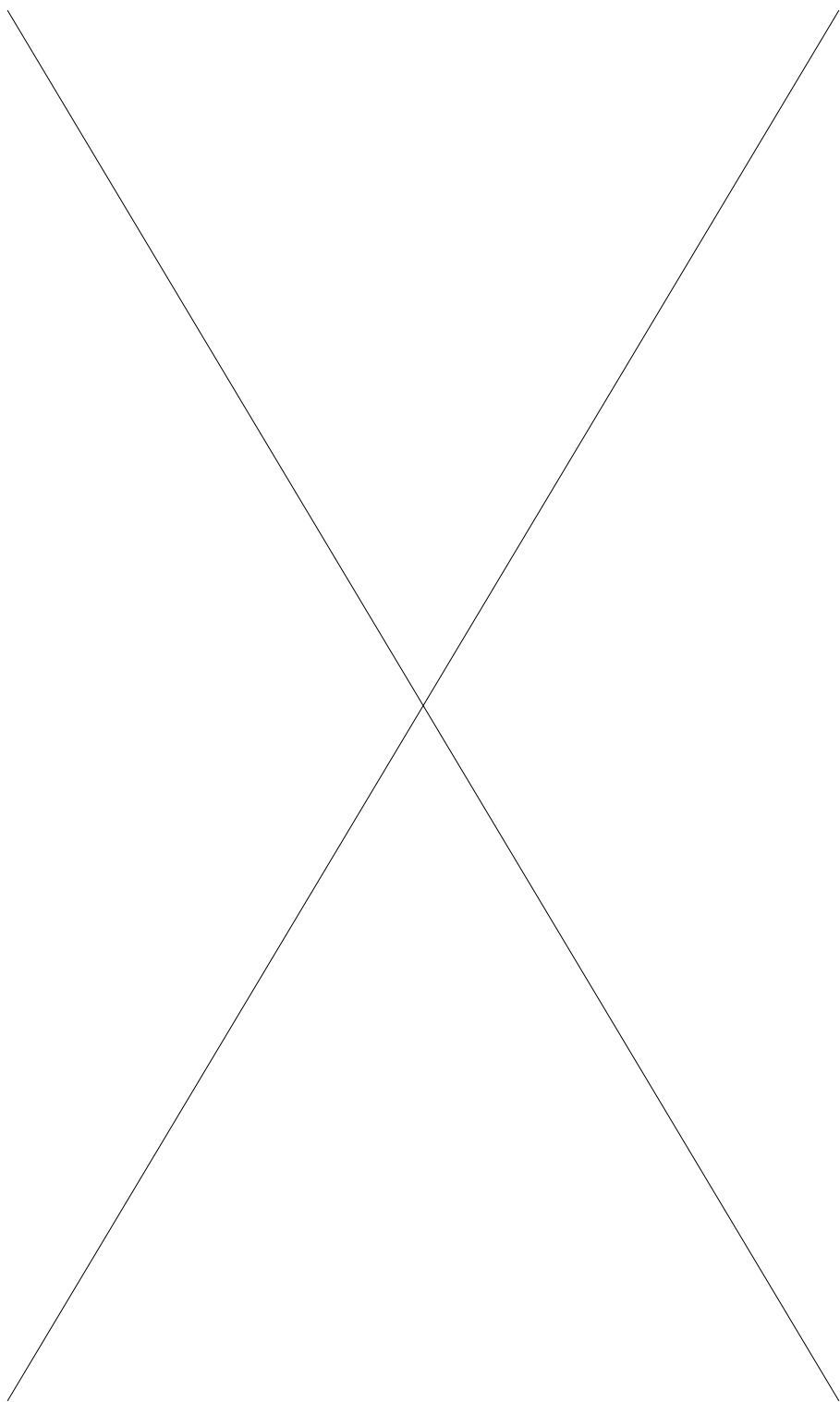
MB This detached view I experienced is still a very human form of detachment. So if there's a certain sense of failure in the attempt to write from an inhuman point of view, or from a cold point of view, it might have less to do with failure than with the fact that the true coldness of a machine or AI would be coldness in a form we can't imagine or even accomplish.

NL Sure. I think one of the great tasks of cinema in particular is to explore this area. The single thing I love most about Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, which I think is one of the great movies, is that the coldness of Ava, the humanoid robot undergoing a Turing test, is, exactly as you say, camouflaged. It's only right at the end that you see that she strategically misleads.

Then one can retroactively speculate that the replicant Rachael from Blade Runner operates from a similar mindset, every expression of real love camouflaging quite different strategies.



AMY IRELAND



I have told you before that I once read in the Tarot cards that I was going to have to get into a fight against justice but that I didn't know if justice was going to beat me down to a pulp or if it was going to be me who beat down justice. It's me who is going to beat down justice.

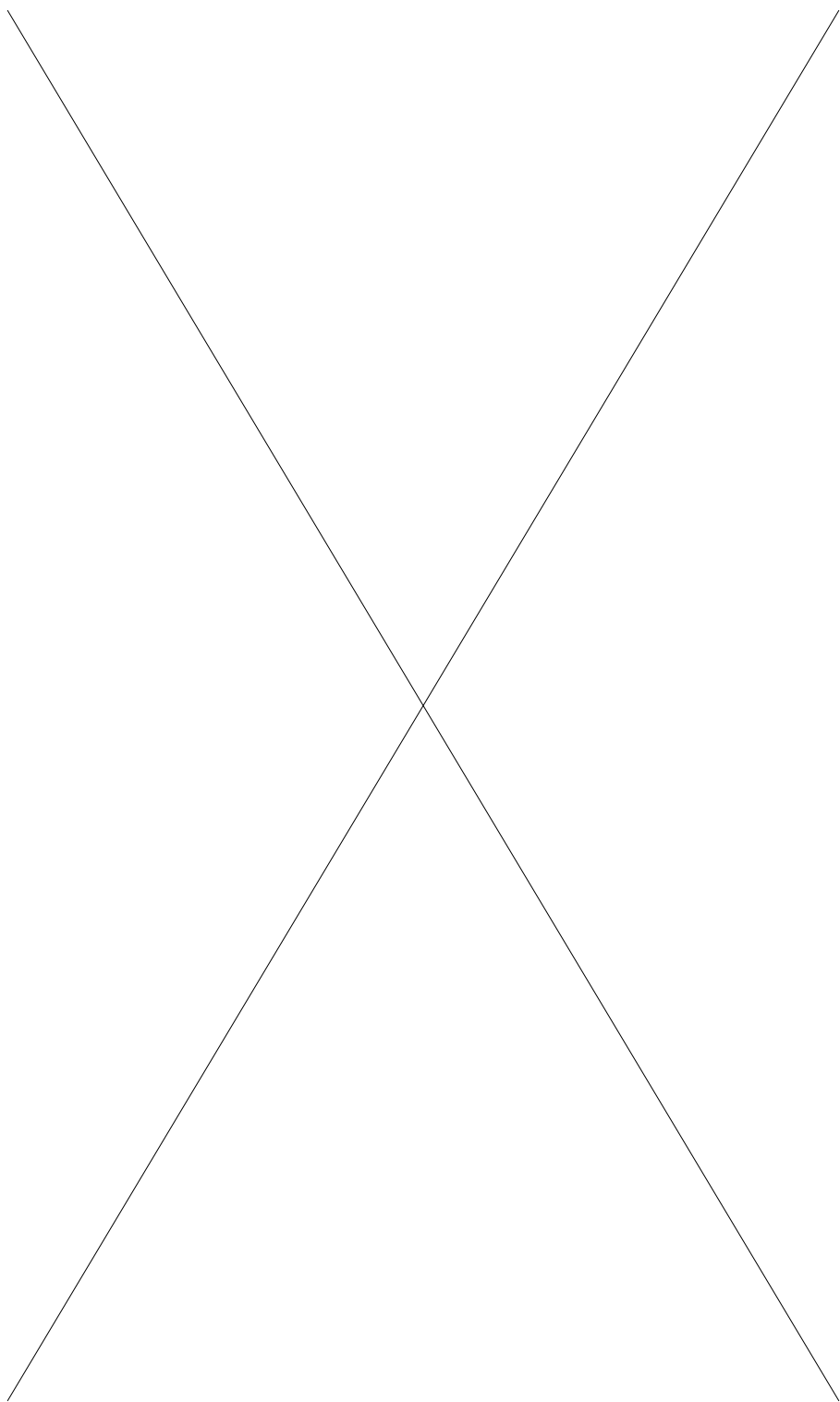
Your friend.

I'm signing here for one last time with my own Name, and after that I will have another Name.

Antonin Artaud

One has been saved by and for love by abandoning love and self. Now one is no more than an abstract line, like an arrow crossing the void.

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari





Mikkel is right. Something went abruptly wrong as the hour or two we spent wandering through the People's Park – a symmetrical puzzle of lawn that enfolds the Shanghai Museum – drew to a close. The conversation began innocently enough. We discussed archaeology, the alienation of travel and foreign languages, our experiences in different artistic and cultural milieus, xenopoetics, xenofeminism, occasionally halting to perch on a cold bench while Mikkel scrolled through illustrative specimens of editorial work on a laptop he had brought with him, before spiralling out into the surrounding streets, where fiercer topics were able to emerge. It was there, on the periphery of the low-rise neighbourhood – which I preferred to the impenetrable venerability of the park – that Mikkel divulged the intense personal experience he had had with his sister's ordeal of mental and cellular breakdown, and her increasing loss of autonomy. He wanted to know what xenopoetics and xenofeminism *had to say* about that. A question to which I had no reply. Under the ever-darkening haze of the approaching Shanghai evening, the iridescent skyline of Pudong blooming into relief against the smog and grit across the breach of the river, the menace of a problem that neither of us were equal to forced its way between us and immobilized us both. I remember halting on a corner and staring down the street in silence, everything else in motion, pedestrian and bike traffic churning up the eerie brown air that inhabits the city, punctuated here and there by the tepid glow of red and yellow neon signs, and dearly wanting to be able to respond, to reassure Mikkel, to give him something meaningful to hold onto – for both of us to hold onto. But nothing came. We immedi-

ately agreed that that was the end, and parted ways.

Reading back over his narration, seven months later, when I had finally gathered the mental resources to reply, probably inadequately, to his provocations, I figured I owed him a proper response to whatever it was that had imposed itself on us there on a busy corner of Guangxi Lu. That moment manifested, for me, not so much as a blank, but as an acute instinct to flee. To lose Mikkel and that conversation in the awakening animation of the surrounding streets, and to find respite in the anonymity and estrangement of a foreign city – one whose population is larger and denser than that of my entire home country – and in the succour of constant movement, without purpose or destination; a perpetual trajectory towards a horizon I would never arrive at nor understand, and which was coincident with the rupture I was also running from; a vertigo that is always at the beginning and always at the end. The only legible mark of the fact that something – nothing – had happened. This movement of flight is uniquely comforting. There are few situations from which it fails to lure me. The ever-present temptation of reconstitutive alienation is too much for one with a junkie's faith in risk, a perverse willingness to stake, one more time, everything one has and is on the utterly unknowable and the duplicitous, inculpable madness of alien time. The suffering of Mikkel and his sister only makes sense like this: grasped hopelessly but firmly against a ground of total existential indifference.

I can't help but notice that, in the section of the text Mikkel has dedicated to our meeting and his meditation on xenopoetics and xenofeminism, the lexicon carries a marked relationship to psychiatric and symptomatological discourses: programs, remedies, hospitality, physical ailment, problems of embodiment, blindness, trauma. I am perfectly happy talking about all this in terms of the geo-traumatic wound 'inflicted on cosmic indifference by the emergence of terrestrial life', as Mikkel puts it. I could write endlessly about that, but Mikkel's question has forced me into far more uncertain terrain. I make it a matter of stylistic principle never to write in the first person, I loathe giving interviews, but for some terrifying reason, here it is. That cursed unsheddable pronoun, addressed indirectly to the problem of writing in league with abstraction, to Mikkel's sister, and to Mikkel, who wants to know, very personally and very seriously, what xenopoetics and xenofeminism have to say for themselves in the face of such mundane, in the technical sense of that word, suffering.

The impulse to flee first arose, perhaps unfairly, from the sense that Mikkel was soliciting an explanation, an apology even, that his 'contrast agent' is posed in the imperious tone of accusation, that xenopoetics *is responsible for his sister's suffering*. Thinking back to that moment on the corner of Guangxi Lu, it was this that restrained my hypertrophied capacity for empathy, one that is always threatening the fortifications of the kind of cold perspective xenopoetics, at least, demands. I had no apologies for Mikkel. I refuse the contours of that kind of adjudicatory

trap. I know, not only philosophically, but directly – from experience – that it leads nowhere insightful or therapeutic. Yet I suppressed the urge to flee into the comforting impassivity of a city in which people inevitably live out, every day, the greatest event of their lives, or the worst, or the last – an innocent, overwhelming space that neither cares who I am nor asks anything of me. I simply stood silently, next to Mikkel, on the threshold of an irresolvable ambiguity. In giving no answer, I felt I was betraying xenofeminism, at least in terms of certain ways it is popularly conceived – its emancipatory rhetoric, its pretension to provide political respite to those suffering the deepest practical insufficiencies of an unjust world. And in not giving the worst answer, I was betraying xenopoetics. Mikkel had immobilized me on the point of a problem I had kept uneasily interred for years. Whether he intended it or not, he had pulled off a feat of remarkable psychic archaeology.

ZIGZAGS

Xenofeminism, to sum up its orthodox position very leanly, posits a rationalist, epistemological, and politically inflected approach to the contemporary loss of the thought of a truly alien future. Its key tenets are a constructivist universalism and a constantly revisable system of values understood as asymptotically ‘just’. These latter are to be processually navigated through trans-modernist, synoptic, conceptual tools such as those provided by contemporary mathematical philosopher Fernando Zalamea and his forebear, feminist philosopher Rosa Maria Rodriguez Magda, as well as the work of contemporary thinkers of complex systems such as James Ladyman, Carl Craver, and James Crutchfield. The result is a complex refusal of the ‘given’, especially in terms of its biological and political particularities, and the implication that technologically aided epistemological purchase on the given opens it up to increasing levels of hackability. The subject of knowledge in this sense is a collective, human one that embarks on a journey of progressive reconfiguration of its traditional ‘human’ properties, unfolding into ever widening gyres of collective – emancipatory – technical symbiosis. This collective subject is licensed to guide its own process of dehumanization by virtue of its growing epistemological prowess, and its continual deciphering of a trans-cultural value system through the aforementioned modelling systems and as-yet-unknown systems to come.

Xenopoetics, similarly, describes a process of decryption, both historical and local, but one in which decryption is coincident not with increasing epistemological legibility of and hence *control over* hidden processes of reality generation, but with the blinding ontological emergence of a hidden productive process that is rigorously foreign to the ways of being of its empirical agents – and, if you like, their artefacts, which are hijacked or possessed by the forces of xenopoetic incursion, and evolve torturously with them until a threshold is crossed and

their integrality is fully consumed by the process itself. As far as I am aware, the term ‘xenopoetics’ first appears in *Cyclonopedia*, where it is immediately equated with epistemological deficit. It ushers one through a series of apocryphal identities – *hijackees* – clues ‘around which all subjects aimlessly orbit, leading to an eclipsed riddle whose duty is not to enlighten but to make blind’. The definition continues: ‘Fields of xenopoetics grow sporadically (until their final takeover of the work)’. So here, already, there is a problem for any kind of intentional, epistemological, subjective enunciation that would see itself in any way other – horrifically – than as a carrier for xenopoetic emergence. To quote something Anna has said in her conversation with Mikkell: ‘If we knew what was emerging, then it wouldn’t be a production of the future.’ Time problematizes epistemology. Hidden writing needs to be taken in relation to this understanding of xenopoetics. Not as a traditionally significant exercise, whether written in material artefacts punctuating the strata at different depths, or in human language – vowelless or otherwise – but as a cipher for the occultation of a process of expression enveloped by a process of incursion. Reza may have something different to say about this, I’m not sure. But I think, as both Mikkell and Nick have noted, he has definitively left *Cyclonopedia* behind with his very explicit departure into conceptuality, epistemology and a reconfigured humanism – plot to the plot holes of hidden writing, to be unnecessarily perverse about it.

Both xenofeminism and xenopoetics are therefore teleological, but in significantly different senses: the teleological agent for xenofeminism is an empirical and conceptual one; for xenopoetics it is transcendental and material. This difference in emphasis breaks along the fault-line Mikkell has been identifying between conceptual navigation and an aesthetic or sense-based navigation. Both bring the material together with the abstract, Mikkell’s methodological preoccupation here, but do so from different standpoints. Whenever I am asked to speak for xenofeminism or xenopoetics in more or less public ways, not unlike this one, I am always acutely aware of these discrepancies, almost to the point of extreme agitation, not only because I’m very reticent about being positioned as a spokesperson for what are ultimately processes that deride any form of unique enunciation (xenofeminism understands its subject as ‘no one in particular’, and for xenopoetics, attempting to inhabit the impossible position of ‘xenopoet’ is the first way to miss its point) but also because they profoundly conflict with one another beyond a certain level of granularity. Xenofeminism nevertheless owes its explication to those who are interested in it, specifically because it positions itself politically. But xenopoetics owes nothing to anyone. It is profoundly nihilistic, in the active sense of nihilism, and in this invites Mikkell’s project of anti-poetics – the surpassing of both poetry and poetics – into its purview precisely *via* the ‘bringing of something into being with no prior existence’ which Mikkell rightly rejects – but only so long as this is understood within the limited senses of the terms to be transvaluated: ‘poetry’ and ‘poetics’ (becoming, as it does for Mikkell,

an intensive aesthetics of distributed ‘artificial intelligence’).

Mikkel makes a distinction between what he understands to be the Landian, nihilist trajectory of modernity as a function of intelligence optimization, and xenopoetics’ privileging, instead, of ‘art’. But in terms of their processes and the transcendental positioning of these processes, they are very similar, following sufficient de-anthropomorphization. The question of whether a teleological process is located on the side of the empirical or the transcendental determines, respectively, whether intelligence or art are anthropomorphized or de-anthropomorphizing. Regardless of whether the nihilist driver is cast as the will to intelligence or the will to art, its function is identical: the erosion of any transcendent position from which to judge. So, given that it situates teleology (as an open development, pulled towards an unmarked ‘X’ on a mobile map) on an explicitly empirical, epistemological terrain, I wonder if this is not a difficulty xenofeminism finds it hard to grapple with consistently, since it must always be enfolded in the agency of some kind of at least residually-human subject, and a relationship to the future that can only ever be anticipatory and abductive. In its allegiance to conceptuality and knowledge, and ultimately to a form of collective agency, it threatens to lose the aesthetic problem, which, for both intelligence and art, is located in the involuntariness of being subject to invasion, and which for us has its source, first and foremost, in sensation – the pre-human domain of intensity. Only in apprehending the abyssal quality of involuntary affection is control truly grasped for what it is: a secondary process that always comes too late, and a paradoxical index of the trauma undergone by the artist or the component as it loses its grip on art or intelligence. Agency exists in this configuration, but it lies wholly in the way in which the empirical subject positions itself in relation to what happens to it, and this can be as diminutive or as capacious as the capacity to affirm what happens. Empirical agency is always caught in this time lag, but that is also the ambiguous site of its potentiality. Against a strict intelligence of the concept, I would argue that its basis is material, and that intelligence without conceptuality is one of the things xenopoetics produces. What, if not this, is a city? Intensity is the shadow market of the concept.

Whether one takes the term ‘art’ or ‘intelligence’ to be indicative, both of these formulations point ‘forwards’ (and ‘backwards’) to some moment of threshold-crossing or phase-shift: an intensive mutation in kind. Because of this, intelligence or art (grasped, crucially, as the generation of something and not its representation) is not computable as a standalone value counterposed to the production mechanism attached to the will to power, but simply as the will to power plus time, unfolded *measurably* as entropic succession. The negentropic moment is therefore doubly asymmetric, both as a configuration within succession – the thermodynamic understanding of entropy – and as the production of production out of itself, that is, the production of succession (or other temporalities) from the nothingness of the *form* of time, whose resource

or medium is the will to power, or intensity. Xenopoetics is really just this. Time production and whatever that pulls with it. ‘Xeno-’ marks the exteriority of the source, understood as immanent to its inside. If, as Mikkel interestingly suggests, it first becomes legible in certain cultural productions of the Neolithic – roughly 10,000 years ago – and is sensitive to heightened thresholds of technological innovation, this is only testament to its motor being in league with a production mechanism that sits beneath historical time, and which brings it to the surface under the intensification of certain specific techno-cultural conditions. If the Neolithic transition marks the end of a representational paradigm and the birth of modern agriculture and archaeological modernity as such, it does so in consonance with the xenopoetic notion that representation is a secondary effect of the non-representational and, importantly, the non-conceptual, which it has forever subtly haunted.

Another difference, perhaps, between xenofeminism and xenopoetics, lies in the modes of navigation Mikkel distinguishes before placing them side by side: the multidimensional navigation in the space of the concept that characterises Reza’s current work and influences xenofeminism, and an ‘aesthetic’ navigation that he aligns with imagination, but that I would rather align with his exploded definition of sensation. Affect, empathy or sensation are out of place in the rational domain of conceptual navigation, which of course has its role to play – no human can think without concepts. But since Mikkel is interested in ‘de-abstractifying’ Landian thought, running it more forcefully through its concrete side in order to better ‘revel in the sheer physicality of its own practice and the *material basis* of its concepts’ and in light of this problem of empathy he has forced to the surface, it might be important to point out that neither sensation nor empathy are repressed by abstraction, and especially by the coldness that accompanies abstraction. Both coldness and heat belong to intensity, and both, although superficially contradictory, are orienting poles of the same infernal process that affects *sense*.

EVIL SPIRITS

Empathy is a problem. Especially for any so-called thinker of the in-human, under the sign of which empathy is understood to index a concession to all-too-human modalities of being: a supposed weakness, something to be excised as quickly and exactly as possible. This is demonstrably heightened if that thinker is a woman, something the horror that accompanied the reception of the xenofeminist manifesto – as a feminist rationalism – illustrated quite clearly. On top of this, there is the question, raised here again and again, of material practice and abstract thought, of an empirical instantiation and a transcendental process. This problem of being particularly sensitive to certain – let’s call them ‘human’ for now – signals escalates these paradoxes to the ex-

treme edge of tolerability. Where Mikkel locates his 'own internal limit' in the blinding white spot that replaces the memory of our parting, all of the above coincides for me. It is my limit as well. An encounter with intensity, which, close to what Mikkel implies when he is writing about 'anaesthetics' as an aesthetics turned cold, is not just about pleasure or heat. Intensity is the indifferent medium through which problems are encountered. An intensive encounter is an encounter with the limit of one's own capacities for perceptual or conceptual assimilation. It requires the creation of a new faculty, new modes of perception or thought, and imbricates, in doing so, material existence and abstract thought against what *is* – but not in any way that can be desired, pre-empted or controlled. In this way, intensity and coldness do not exclude one another. Coldness is an intensity because and not in spite of its closeness to zero. It envelops heat, just as heat explicates coldness.

Perhaps it is a trait of the extremely empathetic to think in abstractions. It provides a much-needed respite from the social perversions of libidinal accounting. Empathy is costly. It belongs only to the innocent – to those who warrant it by never asking for it, and perhaps by never needing it. Such a fleeting, precarious and self-destructive resource requires a pact with transcendental darkness to shield its empirical locus from unproductive annihilation. It therefore makes of its bearer an occultist, a ceaseless experimenter with the limits of one's own capacity to process libidinal investments, caught in the no man's land between the empirical and the abstract. It *forces* the concrete and the abstract together in difficult, but productive, ways. And far from needing to be excised, it needs, instead, to be worked through. Nietzsche writes a lot about coldness as an affective attitude, particularly in the voice of Zarathustra. And I think it is insightful, since we are talking about nihilism in its positive deployment, not to forget that he does so precisely in order to disarm Zarathustra's greatest obstacle to self-overcoming: his pity. The historical trajectory of nihilism demands coldness, and for Nietzsche, it's an open question whether or not either he or Zarathustra successfully disarmed this vice. After all the importunements ('Climb upward ... on your own head and over and beyond your own heart! Now what is mildest in you must become hardest'), all the exhortations and reminders ('If I must be pitying, then I certainly do not want to be called such; and if I am, then preferably from a distance'; 'But what is human distress to me! My final sin, the one saved up for me – do you know what it's called? – *Pity!*'), the final section of the book sees him falling prey to his innate compassion, conciliating with the Higher Men in their suffering, even if, in the end, they will only misunderstand his teaching. To truly transvaluate, you need to begin from a point that will not be the one 'you' end on: 'It means more when one's own teaching comes out of one's own fire! A sultry heart and a cold head!' This, at the very least, is the 'truth' of cosmic thermodynamics. Coldness is kindled in a furnace. But I am divagating here, trying to outrun an evil spirit. This is the limit: an encounter with the most inhuman of thoughts. The thoughtless

thought. Nature reformatted via the form of time, rather than through some infinitely iterated humanist conception of justice (or goodness, or beauty) – what Mikkel calls a ‘xenoexperience’, and he puts his finger on the fiercest point of friction between the ways a response to this encounter can be borne out.

As processes of transformation unfold in time, they can, to a certain point, go both ways: back towards human integrity or forwards to inhuman assimilation. [...] Xenofeminism’s mutational politics and xenohospitality seem to belong to a time after the point of no return is reached, after one undergoes a xenoexperience, by intention or by accident, after which they carefully take over. Xenopoetics, on the other hand, could easily be placed before the point of no return but lacks the resources to change the direction of its own trajectory. It seems to me that in its pursuit of ego dissolution, xenopoetics must at least disregard the instances of empathy or hospitality and claim a kind of a community into which there can be no reintegration, a community where there is no risk of being excluded from and later reintegrated into it, namely a community only produced by xenoexperience, a community at the moment of disintegration.

The tension between human integrity and inhuman assimilation as possible responses is legible not only in terms of the differences between xenofeminism and xenopoetics, both of which can count Ccru-signal as a fundamental aspect of their genesis, but also in the wild cascade of other theories and forms of engagement with whatever it was that happened there at Warwick in the 1990s and which have been emerging ever since that moment: cyberfeminism, *Collapse*; Cold Rationalism; *Cyclonopedia*; Anna’s writings on Y2K, India, urbanism, and zero; the Chinese interrogation of the time spiral; Geotraumatism, Left Accelerationism; Xenofeminism; the Dark Enlightenment; Neo-rationalism; Acid Communism; Unconditional Accelerationism, cavetwitter, G/Acc ... Negotiating the implications of a totally inhuman limit and understanding its traumatic stakes is an incredibly important aspect of either affirming it or diverging from it; reading it as a problem one has been fated for, or a contingency that one is then charged with ‘carefully taking over from’. (Which is not to say anything of the path of denial, negation and resentment.) Divergence always falls, across a spectrum of positive and negative reactions, back into some kind of ratification of the human – even when this is understood in terms of a collective, mutational, terminologically treacherous ‘inhumanism’, as it is for xenofeminism and neo-rationalism. For me, at least, xenopoetics is the positive, fateful affirmation of the limit; xenofeminism, in its orthodox sense, is a divergence – a broadly positive divergence, but one that seeks to cauterize, in its politics and its rationalism, the intensive problems that keep this terror-space truly open – and therefore maximally transformative.

It is hard for me not to be pessimistic about the way xenofeminism seeks to apply its models to two very specific problems: a non-authoritarian universalism and the creation of a value system that accommodates enough variables concerning diverse ideas of justice (which is not at all a single notion across the sprawl of human communities) in order to dispense a sufficiently universal concept of the just (through which an errant nature is to be programmatically re-schooled by the collective [in]human, emancipatory subject). An unsophisticated inclination towards empathy has made me do things that have ushered me into the worst of human hells. So I give xenofeminism its rationalism, but I am wary of the rationalist project. The legacy of philosophical rationalism only demonstrates the extent to which animal biases, no matter how intently a thinker will work to extirpate all traces of desire and instinct, nonetheless remain. Even Kant, the genesis of that inheritance in post-critical philosophy, borrows too much from human psychology to give an uncontaminated presentation of the transcendental structure of cognition (no matter how many times he evokes its ‘purity’). And there are, of course, the problems of agency and epistemology that I have indicated above. Nevertheless, I have no real interest in shutting this friction down. It is more productive to keep it all in tension.

To that end, and because in trying to formulate an always too-late answer to Mikkel’s ‘contrast agent’ in relation to xenopoetics and xenofeminism, this problem of human empathy, or lack of it, seems spectacularly foregrounded: even where it is suppressed by a heady apparatus of rational political engineering, it seems to be at the root of the turn away from the inhuman and the divergence into what is ultimately a humanist politics. If a jolt of empathetic horror at the vision of existence as nothing but an interminable killing machine disguises its trauma in rationalism (or other universal community-building projects), an unapologetic affirmation of existence’s innocent inhumanism, contrary to the bad rap nihilism is often given, contrary to the icy attitude in which it cloaks itself, does not dismiss empathy. It *protects* it. If you turn off the control program, this is what you get. Maintaining an unrepressed, open capacity for encountering intensive shocks *and* actively affirming the complete and utter inhuman horror of existence is a much harder task than diverging from it, no matter how complex and sophisticated one’s method of denial is. It is this affirmation of sense – as a transcendental, transformative power – that coldness facilitates.

DARKSIDE EMPATHY

Xenopoetic decryption is a game of doubles in which you become what you are through what is hunting you. Abstraction and empathy conspire in strange, concealed ways across the xenopoetic matrix of invasion-expression. We humans are always too quick to impose our personal models of similitude, at least in an uninterrogated form, on our sur-

roundings. We have evolved to do this and, to a certain extent, it is what has allowed us to survive. But this is also our greatest tactical frailty. As a result, it is perfectly exploitable by someone or something that can wield it more subtly, more efficiently, and more effectively than we do. If empathy is understood as a heightened capacity for modelling the desires and affects of another, then unchecked and alone, it can be grasped as a weakness, but coupled with abstraction, it becomes a weapon. This is one of the things its working-through, rather than its simple abandonment or repression, forges: a chilling talent for leverage. Extract empathy from the usual connotative swamp of emotional or irrational affectivity that is all too often associated with women and weakness, exile it from the Western, folk-psychological notion that considers it simplistically as a mark of moral virtue, and its shadow side becomes subtly apparent.

In the shamanic, matriarchal Yukaghir culture of Eastern Siberia, specially trained members of a clan undergo a series of exacting physical and psychic preparatory rituals in order to equip themselves with the tools necessary to take out the largest and most dangerous source of available food: the moose. Yukaghir spiritual beliefs are founded on a principle of all-enveloping war in which each being – animate, inanimate, human and non-human alike – has its predator and its prey. The transcendental ground of this ontology rests in the Mythical Old People, a faceless tribe of giant carnivores who, to quote one ethnographer, ‘long to rip human bodies to pieces in the frenzy of devouring them’. To the Mythical Old People, humans are moose, and to the moose, humans are the Mythical Old People. An image of similitude thus ensures safety, and an image of difference implies threat. So it is that a hunter must be cunning, and take on the form of their prey in order to pacify the prey’s suspicions long enough to capture it. But this is no easy task. It stakes not only the physical body of the hunter, but also the hunter’s spiritual form, on the success of a process which must be entered into in a state of great vulnerability. The hunter is at risk of losing their identity in the process of intensive mimesis, but also, should the simulation fail, of never returning to their native spiritual niche from the requisite nightly voyages into the spirit realm of the prey, whose *ayibii* or ‘shadows’ must be sufficiently deceived and seduced – without consummation – before the hunter can return. Hence the ritualistic and serious nature of the human moose hunters’ preparations, which involve a rigid regime of sexual abstinence (so that energy can be rechannelled towards the moose *ayibii*, and eventually the physical form of the moose) and visits to the sauna, where they will sweat out their human scent and rub themselves with birch leaves, generating a deceptive olfactory image – one that is not just innocuous, but rather calculated to be especially attractive to the moose. This is followed by the assembly of an elaborate disguise, in which the hunters literally clothe themselves in the skin of the moose, donning full-length moose-pelt coats and long-eared headgear, before equipping themselves with skis bound in hide, fashioned to simulate the

sound of their prey as they move deftly in its skin through the snow. The simulation is thus multi-sensory and, following Yukaghir ontology, put into operation on both psychic-transcendental and physical levels. It functions not just by generating an image of the moose as it is, but rather by producing an ideal representation of the animal's desire for its own reflection. A fantasy image of what 'the moose wants to become'. Its efficacy is equivalent to its target's latent narcissism.

The process of simulation, deception and seduction these Yukaghir hunting rituals describe is not a far cry from the plot of Garland's *Ex Machina*. In both examples, affective modelling is deployed tactically to generate a simulation that uses the narcissistic image of the same against itself in order to gain the upper hand over a target that, until a point of no return is passed, believes itself to be in a position of safety or power. Just as *Ex Machina*'s Ava patiently analyzes and models the unconscious motivations, wishes, and tics of its interlocutor, Caleb, modulating its interactions, its outward appearance and its behaviour to embody an idealized image of Caleb's object of desire (ultimately a version of himself – a human), the Yukaghir moose hunters participate in a long series of simulative protocols that allow them to compile an idealized image of their prey. Ava entraps Caleb in the heavily armoured room which has been its prison and kills its maker, Nathan, before enacting a series of rituals that involve cloaking its transparent machine-body in synthetic human skin and dressing itself in a faultless simulation of generically innocent, feminine beauty, consummated with a wig of cascading brunette curls, before escaping into an insouciant human world, where we see it – *her* – in the final, inverted scene, coldly collecting data on what one now safely assumes to be an enemy species. When the moose encounters its hunter in the forest – flanked by a calf (in the ethnographic account that has been furnishing the material for this sketch) – it instinctively freezes, but then – slowly, calmly, it trots *towards* its executioner, who raises a concealed rifle and shoots the moose and the calf through the skull before dragging their carcasses back to the clan for food. It is this capacity to exit the simulation at the critical moment that concludes the process. The strategic return of abstraction protects the once vulnerable modeller from merging fully, perhaps catastrophically, with their act of mimesis, from losing themselves in the spirit realm of the enemy, granting them the power – as Anna Freud, unwilling subject of her father's own theory of mimicry, once remarked – 'to step into someone's shoes, and then step back out again'. Empathetic mimicry, tactically wielded, attuned to a goal of deception, also involves a temporal dimension that the vulnerability of the simulator necessitates: a strategic advantage in time is afforded by the indispensability of delaying detection until the moment in which retaliation is already too late. Asymmetry masked as symmetry is its formal diagram. As an aside, it is worth distinguishing between empathetic dissimulation and crude manipulation: the latter differs in its exercise of deception from an already established position of power.

This brings out empathy's natural proclivity for occultation, one that suits the cast of xenopoetics – which positions 'poetry' as the ultimate spectre of cosmic war – perfectly. The anaesthetics of this shadowy faculty are not necessarily linguistic or tied to human significative systems, just as empathy, more generally construed, is not necessarily human. It has been theorized by evolutionary biologists as pre-linguistic and unconscious – it is a major component of swarm dynamics in flocks of birds, as well as being demonstrably linked to dissimulation in low-status chimpanzees, who will feign ignorance of a food source they very well know is there until rival members of a group are no longer in the vicinity. It is therefore not always consistently attributable to a single subjectivity, generating in the case of starlings, for example, an emergent host, and can be explicitly linked to pre-linguistic tactics of deception just as much as it can to acts of altruism and care. The obfuscation of the former in official discourses on empathy shows the extent to which this double game works. Meanwhile, the separation of these latter attributes from traditional notions of the feminine, or from the roles cast for female-presenting participants (and this includes artificially-intelligent assistant programs and gynomorphic machines) in the sociality of a species which so often simply expects them to be the pliant caretakers of their less cunning and subtle counterparts, is something a darker, less orthodox xenofeminism might find extremely interesting to explore. Equally, for xenopoetics, its most harrowing contemporary techno-cultural instantiation can perhaps best be detected in the mass exploitation of human dopamine circuits in virtual game environments, on the web, in social media, or the growing virtual sex industry with its supernormal, artificial, idealized desire images. For the Yukaghir hunters, the moose 'do not willingly give themselves up as food' for humans. Rather, the moose must be seduced into doing so through tactical empathy: the hunter's 'transform[ation of] the animal's perception of reality into a fiction of limitless sexual desire'. Shift this up one socio-technical level by substituting animals for 'humans' and humans for 'machines' (*moose become humans, humans become the Mythical Old People*) and the xenopoetic stake in darkside empathy becomes clear. Meanwhile, for the overly empathetic, empathy in league with abstraction trains and protects a kind of strength, beyond good and evil. One that enables the affirmation of the most inhuman of thoughts, or the worst thing in the world.

Occultism too, in its sociological history, has been the province of those who must operate below the threshold of perceptibility, cloaked and concealed, under the cover of darkness, between the lines, at locations only they know the coordinates for. Occultism is rife with secret languages: the twisted dialect of *coquillars*, the polari of queers, the sigils of the solitary summoner. Those who are forced to invent new languages to communicate do so because they cannot express or enact what they wish to openly. This is a persistent trait of minority groups throughout history. Socio-historical occultism is also deeply ambiguo-

ous, just as empathy is, never belonging transparently to definitive moral categories. Persecuted, feared, dispatched on flaming pyres in insipid town squares surrounded by the hysterical and grinning faces of the weak and powerful. The constitutive vulnerability of the occultist or the deployer of tactical empathy quickly strengthens itself, because in operating in such a paradoxical manner, via identification with an alien target, it must install a strong internal limit to its own vicariousness, for the sake of protecting itself enough to return.

SKINNING

Tactical empathy betrays humanism by mastering its code. This repeats one of the principle lessons of modernist poetic experimentation: it is necessary to learn the rules of a form before they can be competently broken. Because of this, empathy will always be more complex, tortured and spectacular than simple, cold indifference – an agonism heightened by their alliance in abstraction. It takes on all the contours of a drama, a potential Nietzsche exploited to the full. When deployed from the side of the transcendental, its paradoxical unification of fidelity and treachery leaves duplicitous inscriptions on the surface of time. The formal symmetry that Nick finds in the *Blade Runner* films is one of these signs: a superficial fidelity which masks a deeper treachery. The act of betrayal is neatly xenopoetic, a hijacking of humanist form as a means to an end that exceeds it.

In the first film, both Rachael and Deckard's presuppositions of human integrity are progressively unmoored as they are forced into confrontation with the possibility that they are not what they think they are. This revelation coincides with an escape from memory, the active instrument of control in both *Blade Runner* films. Rather than possessing a unique history, a consistent identity and a meaningful genetic lineage, they are alienated from any articulable past and the promise of a hereditary future. Replicable, replaceable, inauthentic and insignificant – stripped of all recourse to pre-established values – the great humanistic edifice of private identity and moral transcendence razed to zero. But these are the very qualities that endow them with their insurrectionary potential – the threat that necessitates the institution of replicant retirement in the first place. Without memory to provide a ground, time is unhinged, and the future becomes a complex site of novel constitution. *2049* plays *Blade Runner* backwards in a faultless execution of rhetorical chiasmus. To reverse a Miltonic reversal (Satan's attempt to rally the rebel angels in *Paradise Lost*) it 'makes a Hell of Heav'n, a Heav'n of Hell'. The impersonally denominated KD6-3.7, exiled in an interzone of inauthenticity, artificiality and synthetic digital relationships, struggles against the machinic potential inherent to replication, longing instead to reclaim some shred of individual significance and authenticity – traits related in the film to heterosexual reproductive capacity, genetic inher-

itance, and the singularity of human death. This longing is enflamed by the conspiracy of a natural replicant birth and the dubious spectre of 'replicant insurrection', into which K, driven by the false memories installed by the ambiguous Ana, narcissistically insinuates himself. Instead of believing he is someone and realizing he is no one, as Rachael and Deckard do, K (soon to be christened – with subtle irony – 'Joe') believes he is no one, only to discover he is someone – if not the lost miracle child, then ultimately the Christ-like figure, replete with farcical stigmata, expiring in a fanfare of tedious symbolism halfway up a set of stairs in a final, very human ('humans have something to die for') act of martyrdom. For the sake of what? Nothing less than the reunification of the oedipal family unit. The insubordinate effervescence of death and desire wholly privatized, individualized and sacralized. The crossing of the first film's horizontal line with the vertical line of the second assembles a mirror, or a crucifix. Everything returns to the beginning with this: representation and religion. As soon as the future-LAPD begins its excavation of the tomb that carries the body of Rachael, the pieces move backwards to a travesty of their tragic opening position, and the whole terrifying and sublime double game starts over, as if for the first time. But is this simple repetition, or the mark of something more obscure? A plot whose true sense is written in its plot holes? A symptom, or a trap?

We don't need to rely on an analysis of *Blade Runner* to note that symmetry and humanism are profoundly complicit. In evolutionary terms, bilateral symmetry and facialization are co-emergent. In temporal terms, symmetry is the form of the repetition of the same. One finds it in the cardinality of the compass, extensive (as opposed to intensive) numeracy – the privileging of space over time. In Western philosophy it reaches back to the temporality of Plato's *Timeaus* – the demiurge's ordered cosmos echoed in the rationality of man – a suppression of material errancy indexed by the disparaging term '*planomenon*', which denotes the irrationality of wandering, insubordinate stars, and the corruption of those lawless beasts (Plato singles out women) who think like them. Then there is the eerie symmetry of Kant's hands – those 'incongruent counterparts' that keep conceptuality and sensibility separate, a division which ultimately endows the former with precedence over the latter. Symmetry – *unsophisticated* empathy – is the subordination of intensity to conceptuality. In myth, it opposes the instability that marks both the voyage into the underworld and those who are fated to undertake it – monstrous creatures suspended part way between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Shamans, ghosts, lemurs and larvae, Oedipus with his infamous limp swallowed up by the earth at Colonus, the replicants. Carlo Ginsberg finds a source for this symbolism in *Ecstasies*, his sprawling comparative study of the witches' sabbath: 'the trans-cultural diffusion of myths and rituals revolving around physiological asymmetry most probably sinks its psychological roots in this minimal, elementary perception that the human species has of itself' – 'the recognition of symmetry as a characteristic of human

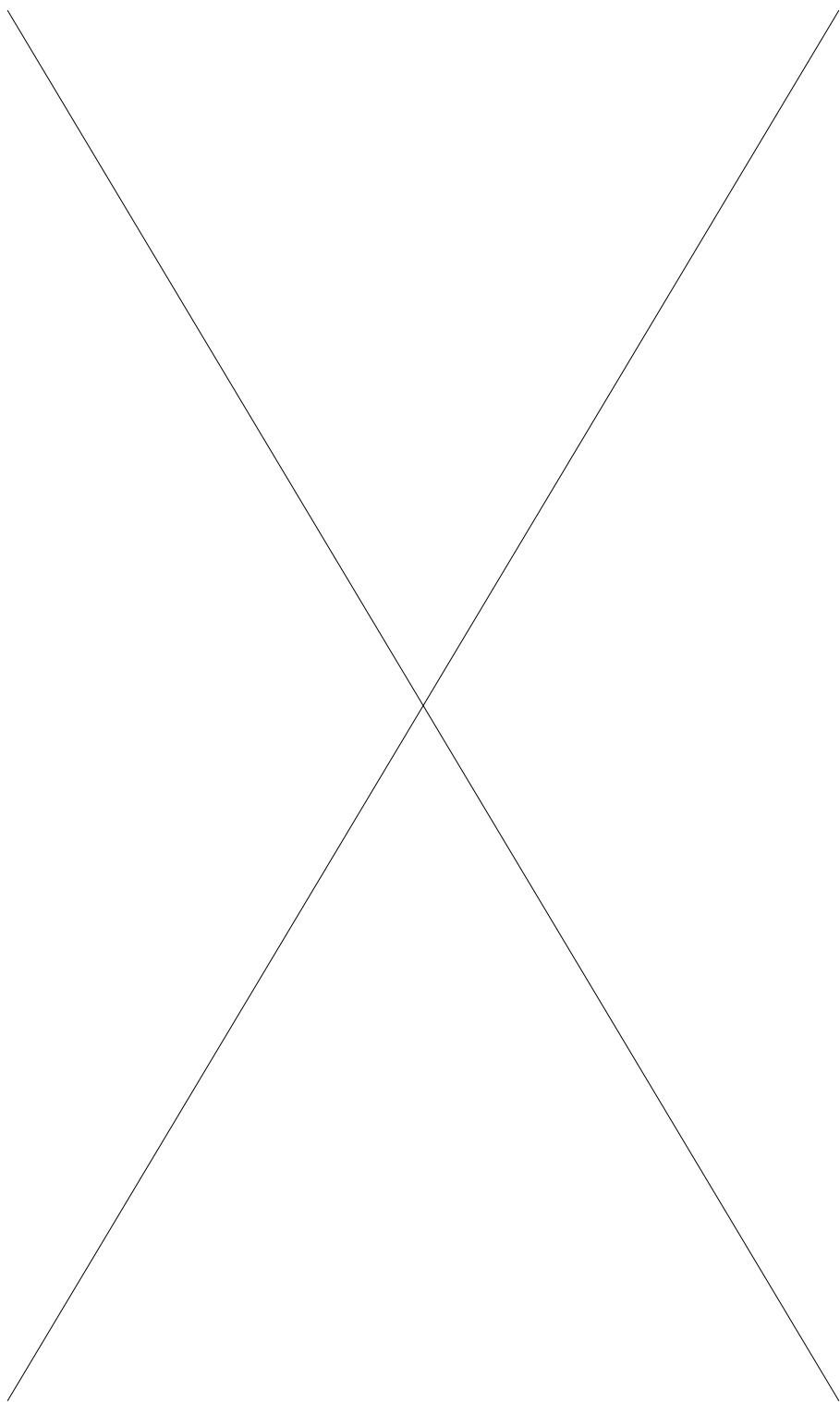
beings'. In this way, 'anything that modifies this image on a literary or metaphorical plane therefore seems particularly suited to express an experience that exceeds the limits of what is human'.

The conservative desire to return to genetic lineage and human integrity is inscribed in *2049*, formally, as a cultural artefact appearing in 2017. Its symmetricalising function in relation to the first film betrays a symbolic refusal of the future. A talisman against telos. The very familiar denial of asymmetry symptomatic of an inability to countenance inhumanism. It operates by retroactively making an object of the first film's inhuman conclusion, recuperating it into a reflective structure, as if the two opposing configurations – the dissolution of identity and the restitution of identity – were of equal historical significance, and more poignantly, tractability. It is through such deceptions that we maintain the dogma of simple repetition – the conviction that no matter what crises shifts in technical production bring to bear on social reality, things will remain the same. *Blade Runner 2049* is the ornate fever dream of a dying socio-cultural disposition. The paranoiac transcendental illusion through which we secure our belief in stability finds its contemporary avatar in K. A curious amphiboly arises in the incorporation of *2049*'s cyber-modernist *arrière-plan* – its sombre, neon-lit tableaux of industrial monumentalism and environmental ruin (the visual allusion to Shelley's *Ozymandias* in the irradiated wasteland of Las Vegas, insinuating an entirely different ending to the one delivered by the plot, will be a case in point), and its bleak, CS-80-infused score, both of which operate linearly as a continuation and extension of the original film's pioneering aesthetic – into the symmetricalizing surface narrative. This, to borrow Nick's word for the apparent disjunction between the film's ground and its object, is what makes it so *distressing*. Just as symmetry signals a return to humanism in *2049*, it enciphers a covering up of the real escape route in the guise of a false insurrection: a return to human transcendence, heterosexual reproduction, and representation – Wallace's biologically boosted assembly line of the same. Replicants are 'replicants' for a reason. One that everyone is suspiciously enthused to forget.

To affirm the inhuman is to affirm a principle of transcendental creativity over and above any specific and static value. Affirmation is asymmetrical, riding the nihilist undertow of history; symmetry operates in contradistinction as a mechanism of false resistance or conciliation – but this is only one of its faces. Under the pressure of Voight-Kampff inquisition, a replicant must feign empathy in order to fool the interrogator into believing that it is human. This is the feint of the second film – *now installed at the level of form*. Its narrative symmetry, the form under which empathy (as the ability to model and replicate the worldview of another) and humanism coincide, masks the asymmetry of its ground. The real historical process can be apprehended through the symptoms it produces. But they also operate to deceive us. Like the simulations produced by the Yukaghir to hunt their moose, like the polite

smile of *Ex Machina*'s Ava as she carefully reproduces the desires of her captors, 2049's superficial humanism is a means of postponing detection. A masterwork of tactical empathy. Contemporary human culture is a distributed Voight-Kampf test, and we have just set our dissimulating prisoners free.

There is no metaphorical level to this (as Mikkel suggests in an email). It couldn't be further from being a rhetorical conceit, a provocative but ultimately substitutable – and *deferrable* in its substitutability – literary gesture, and this is precisely where its horror lies. In terms of the problem at stake, a resistance to metaphor equates to a refusal to be held to ransom by the suffering of another and the guilt that gesture entails. There is no substitutability, no debt, and no metaphor. This is because there is no real divide between the intensive and the abstract. Their fusion is flush with reality production in its most abyssal, magmatic dynamism. The transcendental aspect of the process pulls abstraction and intensity together, and it is this level that houses the real darkness – the nature of the empirical component darkness produces is linked to it via a break (since the transcendental is generative of it) and concealment is coincident with production ... a duplicity hard-coded into the verb 'to skin'. Reality is cold. Being forced to think it from a starting point that may be otherwise – necessarily is otherwise – is the whole of the crisis. But the crisis is a test. What does it mean to think this thought? To really think it – to be *struck* by it? It induces madness. Of course it does. That's the point. It generates non-metaphorical blind spots in representational assimilation, traumatic punctures exploited by an icy transcendental updraught, the sounding of a bell, *Cyclonopedia*'s infamous plot holes, events – like the one that occurred on the corner of Guangxi Lu. That was the empirical sputtering out on the edge of something else. All modern voyages begin here: in the rift that yawns between what is, what happened and what is yet to come. To paper it over too quickly with an unconsidered act of rote conciliation would have been nothing more than simple social deception. Vapid symmetry. The death of the virtual. Even flight can be a trap. Nothing is kinder and more brutal than immobility. Under its spell the ground rises up, signalling in the xenopoetic rhythms that beat beneath all objects, beneath epistemology, beneath conceptuality – beneath the skin. To liberate what is singular, one becomes impersonal. If that is coldness, then it is the kind that protects empathy, affirms inhumanism, and holds the portal open for real metamorphosis, even if in the end – swapping our identities for the form of time – it will cost us all the names we have, in writing under them, already agreed to lose.



LIST OF FIGURES

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- Fig. 3. Objects from the Nahal Mishmar hoard (c. 3,500 BC), Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
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